ようこそ
実力至上主義の教室へ
4.5
衣笠彰梧
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
MF文庫J

4.5
ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ
衣笠彰梧
トモセシュンサク

さくらあいり
佐倉愛里

一之瀬 帆波（いちのせ ほなみ）

軽井沢 恵（かるいざわ けい）

Prologue: Even so the Summer Vacation heads towards its end

Sazae-san syndrome.

I wonder if you've heard of that word before.

If I had to explain simply, it's the despair of having to face Monday occurring after watching the Sazae-san that starts in the evening of Sunday.

In the same vein, as the end of the summer vacation approaches, a lot of students also face a similar despair. They think things like 'if only the vacation had been longer' or 'if only I had gotten to play a bit more'.

But I don't think that way.

In life, the time you get to play to your heart's content is restricted mostly to your student life.

Assuming the retirement age is 60 at it lowest and 18 is the age when one enters society, the years that one is required to work would come up to 42 years. That is a much longer time compared to the 12 years it takes to go from elementary school to one's high school graduation.

Once that has passed, one would then be bound by society and lose one's freedom. And in some cases, one continues to be bound by their work even after having passed their retirement age.

Of course, there are naturally people who are born free

from these restrictions.

Some are born to wealthy parents and sometimes some succeed as entrepreneurs. Shortcuts to life such as those also exist, but the chances of those happening are like the chances of winning a lottery and one needs to understand that.

As a result, for over half their lives, most people have to sacrifice themselves in the name of contributing to society.

Looking at it from the perspective of those in society, being a student itself is like enjoying a summer vacation for them. However, there are many students who become adults without appreciating that fact.

And once they reach ages of 30 or 40 years, they look back at those times and think things like 'I had so much fun back then'.

This story is the story of students who waver back and forth between childhood and adulthood. A small, small story.

Chapter 01: Ibuki Mio is surprisingly a person with common sense

---

Special exam.

The first thing that comes to mind upon hearing that word would normally be writing exams or practical tests related to sports or something along the lines of that.

However, at the school I attend, the Advanced Nurturing High School, special exams aren't simple things like that.

A special exam that pits classes against each other in a survival test on an uninhabited island, or an intellectually demanding game that pits liars against liars on a cruise ship. Such tests that surpass logic continued one after another over the course of the summer vacation.

For a 1st year like me, the days of brief respite from all that, including today, numbered only 7. Once that time is up, the second semester will resume.

And by the way, the manner in which I spent those days of rest was quite simple. I just spend day after day without calling anyone or speaking to anyone.

In other words, it was very lonely.

"I don't mind either way."

I'm already satisfied with just having my freedom, I don't wish for any extra happiness.

It's not like I wanted friends of my own. But recently, I had begun thinking something like that.

The more connections I forge with people, the more people I would be able to hang out with.

But that in itself is problematic. If a friend of mine were to ask me out, there's a possibility that I may be overjoyed by that.

But even in solitude, there are things I can still do.

As a matter of fact I'm doing one of those things right now, using my phone to access my point balance.

I saw on the screen that I currently had 106,219 points. Of them, I transferred 100,000 points to one of my classmates, Sudou Ken. And not too long after, the person who received the transfer, Sudou, called me.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. What are you doing just now?" he asks.

"Nothing in particular. I was just wondering what to have for dinner."

"I see. I ate some Sasami just now. The taste is simple and easy to get tired of, but for that, I can change it up a bit. I can bake it or boil it...but what the hell that's not important. What I wanted to ask was about the fortune-teller." Sudou said.

Fortune teller? Now that's a word I didn't expect Sudou to say.

Normally Sudou, who thinks in terms of black and white, prefers things that are simple like the Sasami he just ate. I

never expected that Sudou to talk about things as abstract as fortune-telling.

"The thing is, it seems a really accurate fortune-teller is here at Keyaki Mall just for the summer vacation. It seems to be trending among the upperclassmen. Even during my club, everyone was talking about that fortune-teller. Since I got some 'extra points' as well I feel like playing there. That's why let's go together. Of course I'll treat you." Sudou told me.

It was an invitation to hang out with my fellow classmate, Sudou.

Speaking of Keyaki Mall, it seems to be that facility that students often use. Since students are obligated to live on school grounds, it is necessary to prepare the required facilities for students.

But it's not as diverse and unlimited as the outside world. For instance, there are no idol concerts, no amusement parks and no zoos. Since the area is limited, facilities are naturally also limited. To put it simply, it's a small world.

And in such a school, whenever something new happens, it always ends up trending among the students, but I never expected it to be fortune-telling of all things. It was unexpected.

But even so, I reply back in a positive tone.

Since no one had ever invited me to hang out with them before, I was so happy I could not stop those feelings and quickly asked him back.

"When are you going?"

"Tomorrow morning. Apparently it's happening at 10 but if you don't go there early it seems you'll be stuck in a queue, we should be there by 9:30."

Sudou tells me.

It seems Sudou already has the schedule planned out in his head, that means it'll save us time.

"I'm fine on my end, but what about your club?" I asked him.

"Yeah. The tournament I was telling you about a while ago ended just now so it's fine. We've been training every day until we collapse, you know. If they don't let us rest once a while our bodies won't hold up" Sudou replies.

Sudou was in a basketball tournament today. Even though he had been practicing quietly on his own every day, I was concerned about the results of the tournament. And another thing as well.

"Did you have any 'trouble'?" I asked him.

I made sure to emphasize the word 'trouble' so Sudou understood the meaning of it quickly.

"Yeah. It was fairly hard, with directors and coaches all there. The level of supervision there can't even be compared to the middle school days. We weren't even allowed to chat it up with students from other schools other than direct contact during the competition. The restrictions go as far as our toilet breaks. It thought it was impossible." Sudou tells me.

Even though club activities were technically outside the

school, it seems as expected the school still keeps a severe check on it.

"But anyways, I managed it somehow. I got through it somehow with guts." he said.

"I see. That's a relief. How about Yamauchi?" I asked.

"I made sure to delete the data so don't worry about it. I understand that much at least."

Even Sudou's school life rides on this, so he won't do anything rash. But just in case, I should meet Yamauchi directly to confirm that the data has been deleted, just to be on the safe side.

"By the way, did you manage to play in the important match?"

"Yeah. And among the 1st years, it was only me who got to play. I even received special praise for it. But I lost the match so it's not much to be proud of." Sudou said.

I don't know much about this, but being able to debut in a game as a 1st year itself is a praiseworthy thing.

And from Sudou's words, I sensed more of an acceptance than a feeling of frustration anyways. Rather, it should be seen as him steadily achieving results in the basketball club. He was probably practicing hard for this tournament.

Especially since the 1st years were away from school on the special exams, so to make up for that, he must have been practicing harder than any other student.

"So what're you gonna do? Fortune-telling. You going or not?" Sudou asked me.

"There's nothing I have planned so I guess I'll go".

Once I had agreed to go, Sudou changed the conversation and told me,

"Make sure to invite Suzune too. Absolutely invite her. Understand?" Sudou said.

"...I see"

It seems that Sudou never wanted to ask me to go see the fortune-teller but rather wanted to go with Horikita. But he must have felt even if he invited her, the chances of her accepting were low hence relied on me.

"Just so you know...I don't think she's interested in fortune-telling." I told him.

"Even so, make sure to invite her. This is the one speciality you're good at right?" Sudou asks me.

What speciality? I want him to stop using me as a Horikita invitation machine.

"I'll try asking her. But don't expect too much." I told him.

"Try isn't good enough." Sudou replied.

"Not good enough?....."

I felt that Sudou's words which slightly contained his anger had a weight to them. He's planning out tomorrow on the assumption that Horikita would definitely be there.

"You need to absolutely do it. If you don't invite Horikita, there's no meaning to this." he said.

"Even if you say that, I don't know her plans for tomorrow either. And it's still uncertain if she's interested in fortune-telling or not. Isn't it easier to invite her out for shopping or watching a movie instead?" I asked.

"No worries. Every woman likes fortune-telling." Sudou said.

I think that's just absolutism...

But anyways, girls do have the image of liking fortune-telling. But when it comes to Horikita, I cannot imagine her acting like a normal girl and enjoying fortune-telling.

"You get it? Whether you invite her or not, make sure to tell me. Absolutely, you got it?" Sudou told me.

And after saying that, Sudou cut the call by force.

I had thought it was strange for Sudou to invite me out for fortune-telling, it seems this is what he really wanted.

While I felt slightly disappointed, I quickly changed my feelings. I better call Horikita quickly.

If Sudou finds out later I ignored his request, it would be troublesome for me as well. Before I forget, I call Horikita on the scene right away.

And soon enough, Horikita picked up the call.

"Hey Horikita, do you like fortune-telling?" I asked her.

Every woman likes fortune-telling. If there's a woman capable of destroying my perceived notions about girls in general, it is undoubtedly this woman.

"You say the strangest thing as an opener." Horikita said.

Indeed. But for me, I have nothing else to open up the conversation with, so there was no choice.

"It would be very helpful if you answered me." I told her.

"So that means if I don't answer you at all, there's a possibility you won't be saved?" she asks.

I didn't expect her to reply like that, but there is indeed a possibility of me not being saved if she doesn't answer. The image of Sudou putting me in a headlock came to mind.

"So? Will you save me?" I asked her.

"If you don't mind owing me one."

So I'll be owing her one just for answering whether or not she likes fortune-telling huh?

I resisted the urge to move my fingers and quickly end the call now, but I have to hold on, Sudou's angry face appeared in my mind after all.

"Please consider it like that." I told her.

Having realized that her answer is worth something, Horikita raised her voice slightly and answered.

"Let's see...I'm not very enthusiastic about it but it would be a lie to say I dislike it." she answered me.

Unexpected, unexpected. Horikita had answered me as if affirming fortune-telling.

"Have you ever had your fortune-told before perhaps?" I asked her.

"Of course nothing like that. It's just I've seen fortune-telling come up in the news every morning." Horikita said.

Perhaps she's talking about the fortune-telling by birthday month that comes up in the news.

I can't imagine a Horikita who changes her clothes or buys accessories after hearing her lucky color is red from a television screen.

"Are you perhaps addicted to fortune-telling?" she asks.

"No, not like that. There's been rumors floating around recently, have you heard about that fortune-teller?"

"Fortune-teller?..."

Silence as though she had remembered something settled in, and perhaps she remember something but Horikita soon replies in a convinced tone.

"Indeed there seems to be quite an uproar over it. I've heard of it." she said.

"I was slightly curious about it. They keep saying it's accurate, I wanted to see how accurate it really was. But, I can't really believe that fortune-telling could be so accurate about something."

I had expected her to agree with me but a different opinion came back from the other side of the phone.

"Is that really true? I think a person with real power can be accurate." Horikita said.

"No, no. Only an esper or something can be that accurate." I quickly replied.

Horikita seemed to believe in that unexpectedly.

Things like predicting a person's future from their face, hands or date of birth. I don't believe in such unrealistic things.

"Not like that. The fortune-teller has no power to divine the future. Isn't that obvious? It's as absurd as someone who believe ghosts exist. But unlike psychics, fortune-tellers have access to a large amount of your past data, in other words, they base their predictions based on a human's patterns. So the skill of a fortune-teller that can guess such things from their customer is indeed high." Horikita told me.

So she's not just a dreaming girl but actually had an answer grounded in theory.

"In other words, a power derived from cold reading, huh?"

"You know quite some cheeky things." Horikita answered in an amused tone.

"We cannot view ourselves objectively but expert fortune-tellers, in a short amount of time, can extract information about you and know even things that the person being divined does not realize. And that's what's left as the result of

fortune-telling. Couldn't we think of it like that?" Horikita said.

Cold reading.

Literally means reading someone's mind without any prior preparation. It's a technique that draws out information from a person through casual conversation to make them think you know more about them than you actually do.

Using 'observation' and 'insight' skills to gain information on your target. And make them believe you could see the future and past by using words masterfully.

It's easy to say, but actually doing it while avoiding mistrust from the target and making them believe in it requires a high level of skill.

"I've become a bit interested."

"I'm glad. I think it'll be good for you to go." Horikita said.

"Then why don't you come along?" I asked her.

"You're kidding, right?" she replies.

"I'm quite serious."

"I refuse." Horikita said.

I tried slipping in words of invitation into our brief conversation but she brilliantly rejected them all. But I have my own reasons for not being able to accept her rejection simply.

"I'm an amateur when it comes to fortune-telling, so I think

it's better for me to have someone like Horikita with me." I tell her.

"I'm sorry but I'll pass. I'm the type that's bad at dealing with crowds, you know too." Horikita replies.

Indeed that is true. Naturally there would be a lot of students crowded around the fortune-teller that so happens to be a hot topic right now.

There's even the possibility that it won't simply be students but also adults that would go. I certainly cannot imagine Horikita being in a crowd like that.

I tried to reconfirm it with her without retreating, but even if I stick to it I'll just end up arousing her suspicions.

As for me, if I had truly understood Horikita's words, there would no longer be any reason to stick around. I'm sure Sudou won't cause a big problem too. Maybe.

Once I had quickly given up on inviting her, I cut the call. Then I briefly sent Sudou a message in the chat. Of course, it immediately registered as 'read' and dissatisfied words came back to me.

Sudou had replied [Then I quit] to me in the mail.

As I had thought, my existence was only necessary to him for inviting Horikita. And since I had failed, he had no more use for me.

But I must admit it would be weird for two men to go together to the fortune-teller.

"But even so...fortune-telling huh?" I muttered.

I was not interested initially, but after my conversation with Horikita I had become slightly interested.

I suppose I'll go check it out tomorrow.

* * *

Who the hell actually thought it was a good idea to go see a fortune-teller.

"I may have messed up..."

I knew it, but the late August morning assaulted by a heatwave made it a burning hell. I could even see a mirage forming and gently fluctuating on the concrete that lies ahead near the roadside trees.

Of course the school facilities are all air conditioned and so we don't feel the heat in there. In corridors, in lobbies or in our rooms. However, when directly exposed to the sun, one instantaneously starts to sweat.

So this is how humans die.

While thinking thoughts like that, I desperately attempt to find some shade.

Fortunately for me, the school that boasts of its large school grounds has quite a bit of trees planted. Thanks to that, there is no shortage of shadows to obstruct the sunlight. It is currently 9:30 before the students start their various activities.

I'm heading towards the rumored fortune-teller's location. It seems they start their fortune-telling at 10:00, but I don't plan to stick around for long. I'll just have them quickly divine my fortune and just as quickly leave. That is my aim.

But as I got closer to my destination, I realize that my expectations have been betrayed.

At Keyaki Mall which I had expected to be mostly empty, a crowd of students wearing summer outfits were already there. While I had hoped not all of them would be here for the same reason I am, that is unlikely to be the case.

For now, to escape the burning hell outside, I decided to take shelter inside Keyaki. Since the event seems to be hosted on the 5th floor, I looked around for a nearby elevator.

"Geeh..."

Such a voice unexpectedly leaked out of me.

Because close to ten students had already formed a crowd in front of the elevator. I wonder if people with the same communication deficiency I have would be able to understand too.

Whenever I take the elevator alone, I'm the type of person to repeatedly hit the 'Close' button as soon as I get in. But I'm not as good at taking the elevator with a large group of people the same age as me. I will need a fair bit of courage to get in with the crowd.

It might be a bit troublesome, but for now let's take a detour and choose another elevator elsewhere. There is another elevator in the opposite direction that is currently

unused by students and is kept as a reserve.

"This is calming..." I muttered.

This did require additional effort on my part, but I'm grateful just for the peace of mind it gave me. It is sad though.

Having arrived on the 5th floor, I quickly search for the fortune-teller's location.

And there I encountered a situation more perplexing than the one before.

"There are only couples here."

Boy and girl. Two-in-one groups.

In other words, a crowd made up predominantly of students in a lovers' relationship. Of course there are groups with only boys and groups with only girls here too, but they are the minority.

Fortune-telling was originally meant for this sort of thing after all.

Just divining the compatibility between a boyfriend and a girlfriend is not such a special thing in and of itself. However, it's just I realized this place is a lot more uncomfortable than I had expected.

There's not many people who came to the fortune-teller on their own. More so if it's just a boy like me.

In any case, since there's already a queue forming I decided to line up with them. And when I did, a woman who seemed

to be managing the queue called out to me.

"Good morning. Will your partner be coming later?" she asked me.

"Partner? No, I'm alone." I replied to her.

Of course, given that the people around us are mostly couples it's natural to ask that question, but I'd like her to think more about us singles.

"Ummm..."

Perhaps she still has something to say, but the woman with an apologetic face continued on.

"I'm afraid Sensei's fortune-telling is for couples only..." she told me.

"So it's impossible for me alone?" I asked.

She nods slightly and points forward.

I could not see it well through the crowd of people, but there was a certain note that warned about the requirements.

'We will be guiding you as a pair. Please be aware of this fact' it said.

Reasonable. There shouldn't be a single person like me here after all. Since I had not been confronted with an awkward situation like this before, it couldn't be helped.

It seems right now, I'm in a very difficult position.

And also, I understand now the reason why Sudou wanted

to invite Horikita out here.

In this format of fortune-telling, he and Horikita would have a long time to talk to each other while lining up for the fortune-telling and they can spend a long time together until the fortune-telling is over.

"That also means I never even mattered from the start." I muttered.

Having realized it all now, Sudou's words and behaviour start to take on an entirely new meaning. That I was never even invited in the first place. And even if I had been, I wonder if he would have found an excuse to shake me off.

What a sad story.

"By the way, the queue beside you is the same, is it not?" I asked.

"...Yes. Ukon-sensei's only telling the fortune for pairs..." the female clerk answers.

"I understand."

I bowed my head towards the clerk and left the queue.

And the students, who were already lining up behind me, simply took one step forward.

I never expected this kind of trick to be involved. As for me, my image of fortune-telling was that of an old woman on the side of the street counting coins while doing her job, something like that. But recently, it seems recommended for couples fortune-telling like this also exists.

I thought it wouldn't be too bad to experience fortune-telling once at least, but it seems it can't be helped. There's not much point in trying to invite Horikita out again, so I'd better retreat here quietly.

"Huh? So you're telling me I can't get in alone?"

It seems in the queue beside me, there's another single victim who came alone, as a voice that sounded like they were angry could be heard from there.

And as I sent a sympathetic gaze their way, my eyes unfortunately met with that person's.

"Ah."

That short answer came from a person who happened to be an acquaintance of mine.

When I pretended to have not seen her and attempted to leave, for some reason, with the same timing, she walked in the same direction I did. I quicken my footsteps.

"Wait."

Perhaps she thought I was attempting to run away (I was attempting to run away), but she chased after me.

"Is there something I can help you with?" I asked her.

"Where is Horikita?"

Having asked that brief question, the girl quickly scanned her surroundings.

She was Ibuki Mio, a student of Class C.

She too, like Sudou, seemed to be attempting to get at Horikita through me. However, unlike Sudou, Ibuki's actions in this case is reasonable.

It's just, it would be a great help if she could get to Horikita without needing to pass through me.

"It's not like I'm always hanging out with her, I'm alone today." I told her.

"Ahh. I see."

In the previous uninhabited island test, this Ibuki was sent to Class D as a spy and tried to throw the class into chaos. And then she later fought with Horikita, and since then, Ibuki has been antagonistic towards Horikita. A rivalry would be more accurate for their relationship.

Although her usual tsun attitude has not changed, she does have a pretty good fashion sense and definitely leaves a good impression. If she acted a bit more mature, I wouldn't be surprised if she became popular.

"Normally fortune-telling is done one-on-one isn't it? I didn't expect this at all, don't you agree too?" Ibuki asks me.

"I suppose so. I did have that sort of image." I replied to her.

"So? Didn't you ask Horikita out for this?" she asked.

First it was Sudou and now Ibuki. The topic of the conversation is always about Horikita, who's not even here.

"I didn't. If you want to talk to Horikita that much, why

don't you go and see her yourself? Tell her you want to go see the fortune-teller together." I told Ibuki.

"Huh? Absolutely not. It's not like I have anything to talk to her about anyways."

If that's the case then I'd like you to not talk about Horikita again and again.

"I never was really interested in fortune-telling from the start so I have no regrets here. How about you?" I asked her.

"I'd be lying if I said I have no regrets..." Ibuki told me.

It seems the pair requirement presents a difficult problem for her which she realized, as she shook her head while stating her regret.

"I can't do anything but give up now. I'm also bad at talking." Ibuki said.

That was an answer that wasn't really an answer at all.

She did say she was bad at talking, but unlike Sakura, she didn't seem like the type that would have trouble carrying on a normal conversation. In fact she is perfectly capable of talking to me on equal terms...or even talking down on me.

"Why don't you invite Ryuuen?" I asked Ibuki.

I said that as an added joke, but she made a face of disgust equal to or perhaps even greater than Horikita's.

"I'd absolutely hate to see his face even during the holidays. You must be joking." Ibuki replied to me.

"But you were together with him on the ship, weren't you? Isn't it normal to think you two are intimate?" I asked her.

"...that's only because I felt responsible for not figuring out the leader of Class D." Ibuki said.

She answered weakly like that.

If what she says is true, that would mean Ibuki acted together with Ryuuen then as a means of taking responsibility for her failure. That alone didn't give me the whole picture but that must be something only Class C would understand.

Even so, in the first part of the special exam, the uninhabited island test, Ibuki successfully identified Horikita as Class D's leader, and she was not wrong in her assessment. If I had not interfered, she would have made a big contribution to Class C undoubtedly.

"I wanted to ask you something, but during the island test, who was Class D's leader?" Ibuki asked me.

"I wonder."

"I wonder? It's not like you don't know." she said.

"Even if I knew, I wouldn't really tell you. But I really don't know. I think most of Class D is also in the dark, wouldn't they be? Horikita was moving in the shadows, and she must have pulled it off somehow and that's all I can make of this." I told Ibuki.

Ibuki stares at me as though looking through me. But, I'm not so foolish as to be seen through by such a simple observation.

"...well, if it were that easy I wouldn't need to go through this much trouble."

Ibuki shrugs her shoulder as if she had given up.

"If Ryuuen is no good, why don't you invite girls from your class?" I asked Ibuki.

"If I had such a person I wouldn't be in this much trouble. I absolutely dislike the girls in my class." Ibuki said.

It seems even her classmates are included in the category of people she absolutely dislikes.

Ibuki is like Horikita...or even more so in her antisocial nature. In that sense, they are birds of a feather. And with a trigger, it feels like they could get along perfectly.

"But just like you're talking to me right now, Ibuki you should be able to talk to anyone else normally. I don't get the feeling that you're particularly bad with people." I told her.

"That's not true. When you talk with me you get that feeling don't you? A thorny feeling." she replied.

"I guess that's true."

Whenever I would talk with Ibuki, I get the feeling that I'm being pierced by a sharp saw. That is probably, Ibuki's expression of her distance with others.

I'm sure this feeling would be conveyed to the other students as well.

"Whatever I do, the mood always ends up bad like this. You

get it?" Ibuki said.

In other words, because she's bad at socializing, she cannot invite her classmates.

It is still doubtful whether 'bad at socializing' is appropriate or not, but it must be a fact that this Ibuki likely sees even her classmates in an antagonistic light.

I can even picture her challenging the fortune-teller with that headstrong attitude of hers.

"Even though you're bad at dealing with people, it's strange that you would try having your fortune told."

"That's another one of my troubles. It's sort of like liking cats but having an allergy to cats too. That sort of thing." Ibuki told me.

That must have been truly frustrating. Even though one likes something, they still find it difficult to accept or do, or something like that.

"It's amazing you'd be the spy in Class D even though you're like that." I told her.

Even though she always had a tsun attitude, she never showed any sign of discomfort during her spy activities, not once. Because even the Class D students, without suspecting Ibuki, took her in.

"That and this are different. In any case, talking to others makes me anxious. And because I get anxious, I become nervous. I don't like that. That's why it can't be helped. It's not like I became like this because I like it. Why am I even talking

to you about this? What if we get misunderstood?"

Ibuki stopped the conversation at that while looking away.

But that's also my line.

And before I realized it, the people around us had already moved up the queue and only the two of us were left behind alone. The other students might misunderstand us.

But still, getting nervous after getting anxious, huh? So that's where the root of her weakness lies. If that is true, a method to counter it might be unexpectedly easy.

There is a plan that would counter this weakness without needing to figure out the roots of what had made her anxious in the past.

"Earlier, you said it was a different matter when you were spying, didn't you?" I asked Ibuki.

"I did. Because it is a fact."

"Then what's the difference between that time and usual?" I continued the question.

Having heard the question, Ibuki mulled over the answer and was silent for a while. And answered in a way that was very like her.

"I don't know. Different things are different. That's all." she said.

More than an answer, it seems she's given up on trying to tell the difference entirely.

"It looks like you haven't given it much thought." I said.

"Obviously. I wouldn't notice such trivial differences. I was acting then after all." Ibuki replied to me.

"No. I think it's surprisingly simple. The difference between talking to others and your acting back then, is simply a matter of 'recognition' I believe." I said.

"'Recognition'?"

In response to the word she did not expect to hear, Ibuki's interest must have been piqued since she turned to look at me.

"Anyone would feel anxious if they imagine talking to a person face-to-face. But, that nervousness is only because you're conscious of it, whether there was acting involved or not is irrelevant." I told Ibuki.

For instance, somebody who's bad at dealing with members of the opposite sex, even if they convince themselves 'I'm going to become a normie', and go to mixers and such. There's no guarantee that their anxiety wouldn't prevent them from talking with loquacity.

As a result, they would not be able to exert more power than they usually do. If they are still able to talk skillfully despite that, that would only mean from the start, they always had that capability in them.

All it takes is to consider communication skills and athleticism as the same. Your talent and ability you've cultivated are tested in that sense.

In other words, Ibuki has the 'ability to talk with others' but simply lacks the ability to 'properly carry it out'.

"Until now, you've been projecting your delusions onto the various people you meet, and when you come face-to-face with them you seize up. That turns into anxiety and as a result, you're unable to talk well with them, isn't that it?" I told Ibuki.

"What's that supposed to mean? If it's someone with a high communication ability they would not even notice. But normally when you come face-to-face with a person, anyone would get anxious right?" Ibuki replies.

"Naturally. I'm the same too, but getting anxious even towards merchants and the such is a bit too much. For instance but, would you still feel anxious even if you're talking to a convenience store clerk?" I asked Ibuki.

"Huh?"

"For example, meeting the clerk face-to-face at a convenience store you usually go to. Do you have a point card? Would you like it warm? Do you get anxious when the clerk says those words, surely not?"

"That's...well" Ibuki muttered.

In the end, you become conscious of the one you're talking to and end up anxious after all.

I wonder what they'll think of me, I want to be thought of often, I'd like them to be a good person. It's because one thinks things like that they start being anxious.

But the Ibuki who infiltrated Class D surely had no time to think things like that. She would have been busy playing the victim that she had no time to be conscious of the fact that she wanted to talk to others.

That's why without even needing to think, she was able to pull it off. That is because by letting out her feelings and letting them overflow like it was usual, she was able to convince them of her confrontation with Class C.

"Now that you say it, that is true..." Ibuki muttered.

"It is inevitable that you would feel anxious since it's natural to have the impression that you would be face-to-face with the fortune-teller, but by not thinking too deeply about it. That would help relieve some tension, wouldn't it?" I told Ibuki.

"...I see. Hey, why the hell do I have to be lectured about this by you?"

Once Ibuki noticed her own relief, she glared at me as though she were about to jump on me.

"Once you've been a loner long enough, you notice small details like that. It starts when you start wondering why you are unable to make friends, and like I said earlier you think about the difference between people you get nervous towards and people you don't. And then you end up thinking where people come from and where they go." I told Ibuki.

"Creepy...You seem like the type to become a mass murderer in the future...were you always this kind of person?" Ibuki asks me.

"...well something like that." I replied.

I had thought to pass this off as just a deep reflection of mine, but it seemed to have taken an odd turn. I may have given her the impression that I was a crank.

"I'm going back for now. How about you?" I asked Ibuki.

"I think I'll go back too. It doesn't seem like I can get my fortune told alone anyways. I was interested in Tenchuusatsu though..."

"Tenchuusatsu?"

I replied without thinking to those words you wouldn't hear normally.

"You came here without even knowing such a thing?"

Ibuki sighed in resignation.

But even if you say that, I genuinely am an amateur at fortune-telling. I just came here with a vague idea of having my fortune told freely.

"If I have to put it simply, it's fortune-telling that tells you which days are unlucky for you." Ibuki told me.

I have heard that the world of fortune-telling is a deep one, but I didn't know it was possible to tell the fortune of a specific target.

From the perspective of an ameteur like me, things like 'wear the color red' or 'beware of losing your possessions this month' were the full extent of fortune-telling. But from what

Ibuki is telling me, it seems it isn't limited to just that.

"I was hoping for that, really. I never thought it was only for love affairs."

Ibuki said while looking at the long queue with a dismayed expression.

"But looking from the perspective of the students, using fortune-telling for love affairs like that isn't strange, right? This Tenchuusatsu? There must also be people interested in that who came here." I replied to her.

"Even so, it's impossible as soon as they put the pair restriction on it." Ibuki said.

And with that, without even leaving so much as a parting word behind, Ibuki left.

* * *

After returning to my room, I looked a bit into Tenchuusatsu. And when I did so, it turned out to be an extremely deep subject.

It seems just before 1980, with the public becoming more aware of its existence, Tenchuusatsu was bathed in attention. However, as its popularity boomed, its credibility also came into question.

There was even a case in the news of a famous fortune-teller forced into retirement after he revealed the workings of Tenchuusatsu.

I won't go as far as to say fortune-telling itself is pointless,

but becoming obsessed over it, or believing too much in it can become a problem.

But on the flip side, one could also say that fortune-telling is just that charming to be able to attract the attention of that many people.

It is a dominant topic, and even nowadays, if you approach it from the perspective of a believer, it still holds a considerable amount of accuracy.

Now knowing this, I felt a sense of curiosity wash over me. As expected, I cannot just believe to what extent these articles I found on the net explain the truth of the matter.

It should be impossible to see the future or through a person through fortune-telling. That is precisely why I wanted to have my fortune told once, to discern its credibility. So that I could conclude that it is simply an extension of cold reading.

"I wonder if it's limited only to this month." I muttered.

Once I looked into it, it seems once the summer vacation ends, the fortune-teller will leave too and it's still unknown when or if he's coming back. Depending on the circumstances, it might even be that no person related to fortune-telling will visit this school again.

"But even if I say that..."

I don't have anyone to invite. I'm backed into a corner at this point.

Horikita will most likely reject me again and I don't have

the courage to invite Kushida in the first place.

I'm sure Sakura would be willing to accompany me, but if I bring her to a place full of couples, I may make her feel uncomfortable things.

Other than that would be Sudou or Ike or Yamauchi. Those group of boys. But they probably don't want to spend the remaining days of the precious summer vacation going to a fortune-teller with another man.

"...checkmate, huh?" I muttered to myself.

A simple answer came out.

In my limited interpersonal relationships, no matter how hard I think it seems impossible. In the first place, I dislike the couples-only sort of fortune-telling. You could almost say it's the same sort of thinking as Ibuki.

For those genuinely interested in fortune-telling, it would be a great barrier. And just like that, I stopped my online search.

* * *

And the next day after I had given up, strangely my feet were drawn towards the direction of the fortune-teller.

It's probably just because I was free every day. There's no other reason than that.

"Ahh."

Yet another bizarre meeting. At the same time and at the

same place, I reunited again with Ibuki.

"Why did you come again?...and alone too." Ibuki asked.

Ibuki hugs herself while looking at me with a disgusted expression.

"That's my line too. I'll return the question to you as it is." I replied.

"You said you liked fortune-telling, didn't you? I just thought maybe you'd try to have your fortune told even if you're alone. That's all."

It's a sort of renegotiation then, or perhaps she came expecting the situation to have changed. Or something of that sort.

I wonder if Ibuki just likes fortune-telling that much. I started to feel like wanting to know which part of fortune-telling she likes in particular.

"This is a straightforward question, but Ibuki, are you the type of person who believes in fortune-telling?" I asked her.

"Is it wrong if I believe in it?"

"No, I'm not saying that...but it's not something you can just suddenly believe in right?"

It's not like everyone understands that fortune-telling is an application of cold reading like Horikita does. In other words, there are many people believe in that mysterious power.

"It's something people interested in fortune-telling often

think about first, but if you can't throw aside that thought, you'd be better off not being interested in it at all." Ibuki said.

"Are you saying non-believers have no right to fortune-telling then?" I asked her.

"That's not quite right...let me just say this, it's not like even I believe unconditionally in fortune-telling. It's just that people who are skeptical from the start don't stand to gain anything from this." Ibuki carries on.

"The people who make fun of fortune-telling are full of contradictions. Many people normally don't believe in the existence of a god. But when they're in trouble, it's often that sort of god that they pray to." Ibuki continued.

A good analogy.

God doesn't exist, ghosts don't exist. People who often make statements like that pray to God.

They would visit shrines on New Year's Day and pray for a healthy life, a prosperous business and fulfillment in love. Even if you replace that with fortune-telling, it's still the same thing. What you truly believe in and what you want are different things. Nobody can deny that.

But, yes, if I think such things, indeed I can understand where Ibuki is coming from.

But fortune-telling and believing in gods normally is still different. It's because fortune-telling is done by a human who exists just like you do. It's natural to be skeptical towards something like that.

"Did you get it?" she asks me.

"Yeah. It was easy to understand."

Of course I still have my misgivings, but I did understand the point Ibuki was trying to make. And that's where I made a proposal to her.

"Hey, this fortune-telling requires a pair but it's not like the only thing they're divining is love affairs, right?" I asked her.

"Naturally, yes." Ibuki said.

"In that case, why don't we ignore who our partner is and go have our fortunes told? You and I are both genuinely interested in fortune-telling after all. In any case, if it's a relationship that won't last after this I don't think there'd be any problems." I proposed to Ibuki.

I myself don't feel anything but a flat emotion towards Ibuki. I don't feel anything particularly good or bad towards her, almost like a first impression.

"I don't mind...I'd like to have my fortune told too. But are you fine with it?" Ibuki asks me.

"Horikita's just a friend to me." I replied to Ibuki.

"That's not what I mean. From the island test, there are still students who are holding a grudge." she said.

It looks like, in her own way, Ibuki is looking out for me. If I were to be seen together with her, my fellow classmates might begrudge me too and so it seems Ibuki's worried about me.

"I don't think you need to be worried about that at all." I told her.

And as I answered her like that, Ibuki tilted her head curiously.

"I don't understand why you answered like that."

"If this were a school where everyone gets along, your actions would be a breach of morals. But this school cares only about 'ability' and that is everything, and besides, it was an exam where classes directly compete against each other. And depending on the situation, it's also possible to conduct spy activities or sabotage. Am I wrong?" I asked her.

"There are those that won't be satisfied with just that logic alone. It's not like everyone's this flexible." she replied to me.

"I don't think people like that would have the necessary qualifications to enroll in this school in the first place."

Having given my honest opinion, Ibuki crossed her arms and seemed to be giving it some thought.

"You're surprisingly cheeky." Ibuki finally told me.

"I'm just a failure of a student though. I'm not interested in rising up or falling down. I just ride on the coattails of a student like Horikita and consider that as being lucky." I told Ibuki.

From the perspective of someone who tries to rely only on themselves like Ibuki, what I just said would have been a laughable story. But Ibuki neither laughed at me nor mocked me.

"This isn't uncommon. In the first place, everyone who enrolls in this school is only eyeing the privilege when they graduate. Nobody would've expected they'd end up in competition like this. So most people would find this difficult." she told me.

It seems like the students of Class C aren't that different from Class D.

If that's the case, the Ibuki who caught Ryuuen's eye and was assigned to spy activities early on must be pretty high up in the hierarchy of Class C.

Since she is paid quite the attention by her surroundings, it's also not uncommon for her to act by Ryuuen's side. She had said she was only with Ryuuen because of her failure, but it seems to a degree, she's with him because Ryuuen also trusts in her.

And with the both of us convinced, we lined up in the queue.

And the female clerk who had talked to me yesterday came by again to confirm that we were indeed a pair and handed us what seems to be a ticket. It seems there are 8 pairs in front of us we would have to wait for.

"It looks like we'll be doing some waiting."

If only one fortune-teller is available per queue, even if there were ten pairs that would force us to wait for more than an hour. It's shaping up to be a long wait.

The only question now is, how will the two of us endure for more than one hour? It doesn't seem like I can carry on a

conversation for that long.

"Ahh. Don't be worried about silence, our relationship is only for the sake of fortune-telling so you don't need to speak pointlessly with me, right?" Ibuki said.

"I guess so..."

It seems she's seen through my idea. That saves me the trouble.

* * *

"Next person please."

It was already afternoon when I heard that small voice come from inside the temporarily set up facility.

"I've kept you waiting."

In the end it seemed each group took around 15 minutes each and I ended up having to stand in the queue for quite a long time.

It was around when I had started to no longer care about the fortune-teller inside, that the voice from the room behind the curtain where the fortune-teller was.

And when I entered, inside was a scenery I would often see on the television. The dark lighting inside was only about 30 lux. And added to that, there was a thick book, a hammer and a crystal ball that could also be used to throw whose purpose I didn't know.

The old fortune-teller woman inside had a hood on her and

as such I couldn't see her expression.

The atmosphere of this place alone is first-grade. It seems the crystal ball is shining even now as though it is reflecting Ibuki's and my future.

And before the fortune-teller, there were two round seats with no backrests placed. I suppose that's where we are supposed to sit.

And when the two of us sat down, the fortune-teller simply laughed briefly and her right hand moved.

"First of all, pay up." the fortune-teller told us.

And having said that, she pulls out a card reader from beneath and table and places it on the table in front of us.

From the breathtaking atmosphere that almost gave off the feeling of a fortune-telling museum, artifacts of modern civilization appearing like that and gave off an incongruous feeling.

Of course, I didn't think it would be free of charge, but I was still suddenly pulled back to reality.

"What are you going to divine for us?"

Before she took out her student card, Ibuki first asked that question.

"Your studies, work, love affairs and anything you like."

The fortune-teller replied while laughing creepily with a grin.

It certainly gave off a powerful feeling to the surrounding area, but more than a fortune-teller it looked to me as though she were a witch.

But the price list placed on the table really is a mismatch.

It seems the prices are separated into different categories. The things the fortune-teller said just now seems to be included in the "basic plan".

And in there, it is divided further into more sets. And one of them also includes Tenchuusatsu. And among others there are courses that would let you see up to the very end of your lifespan. And since the fortune-telling has a pair requirement, there are also many courses that focus on romance.

This is just my spontaneous thought, but if the fortune-telling divines a bad compatibility between partners, I wonder what those partners would do then. It's just that for any course, over 5000 points are required. It's rather expensive.

"Even so...it's expensive."

For a Class D student struggling with the matter of points each and every day, this seems to be a severe expense.

But even if I say that, it would be a waste to go back without having the chance to investigate Tenchuusatsu.

There was always the option of simply listening to Ibuki's fortune-telling results and then going back but if I do that, I would have no way of reliably telling its accuracy.

I thought just in case as I checked my point balance on my phone. On the screen, my private points were displayed. The

balance I currently had was roughly 6000 points so it seems like I can barely afford it.

"I'll just have the basic plan." Ibuki said unexpectedly.

Even though she had professed her like of fortune-telling, she doesn't seem to intend on getting the full course.

"What'll you do?" she asks me.

"I'll have the same plan as Ibuki."

At this point it just feels like I'm ordering a meal at a diner, but I said that and held up my student card. The sound of a used card played from the reader and a certain balance was deducted from my card.

"Then let's start from the lady here, what's your name?" the fortune-teller asked.

"Ibuki. Ibuki Mio."

She answered briefly like that.

"My fortune-teller lets me see the face, hands and hearts of my customer. And during the middle of it, I might see something you'd rather keep private. Are you fine with that?" the fortune-teller asks.

"Do as you wish." Ibuki promptly replied.

Ibuki answered that she would not be upset by that, whether or not she believes that aside. From under her hood, I could see not only the wrinkled skin of the fortune-teller but also her sharp gaze.

And then, instructing Ibuki to put out both her hands, she begins to speak of the results of her fortune-telling slowly.

"Starting with palm reading, you will live a long life. I cannot see you suffering any major illnesses as of now..." she spoke.

It seems a story that one usually hears is the opener. I personally don't understand how one can divine that from the lines on one's palm.

Feeling it was pointless, I felt my prejudice wanting to deny fortune-telling.

Perhaps the fortune-teller is using the statistics of their own experiences to divine this? If it were me, I would simply use the good health of many of the customers to, from the color of their face and such, give my answers.

And continuing on, the fortune-teller spoke of studies, financial luck and love affairs with unexpected answers.

While one would normally be angry at the seemingly phony words of the fortune-teller, Ibuki continued to listen to them with a satisfied feeling. There were not many bad predictions, mostly predictions of a bright future for her.

Sometimes warnings are given to her, but it seems there's no particular risk to her life and wellbeing.

"Thank you very much." Ibuki said.

Having finished the fortune-telling session, Ibuki bowed her head.

It seems my turn, where I would be able to understand fortune-telling better, is about to come now.

The fortune-teller follows the same procedure she used during her session with Ibuki.

The answers for my session were mostly the same as the ones during Ibuki's. Even though the circumstances may diverge, bottom line is that the predictions were mostly of good things to come.

However I was warned to be careful of calamity at times. That sort of knowledge was told to me.

"...I see. It seems you have had quite the rough childhood." the fortune-teller told me.

But even if you say something like that, most children experience things they consider tough at least once or twice in their childhood. More so if that child is a boy. If possible, I would have liked her to answer more definitively.

More importantly, it's a bigger mystery why the fortune-teller who is supposed to speak of the future is speaking of the past instead.

But Ibuki beside me, without interrupting or yawning, listens intently to the fortune-telling. Perhaps fortune-telling is supposed to be something like this. Or perhaps as a necessary ritual, we're going back to the past.

Ahh, so fortune-telling really is like this. At this stage, I simply thought that.

Because humans are easy creatures, once 'good fortune' has been predicted for them, they would lock that in their memories and even if good fortune, unrelated to the fortune-telling, occurs, they would bring that memory out and interpret that as 'Ahh. So the fortune-telling of that time was talking about this.'

But in reality it would be different, because in life, it is inevitable that everyone would experience both good fortune and misfortune as well as happiness and misery.

"This is..."

Once again, the fortune-teller who seemed to be in the middle of some ritual, stopped her hands.

"You are the possessor of a fateful Tenchuusatsu." she told me.

"Uwa...seriously?"

The one surprised by that result was not me but rather Ibuki and the fortune-teller herself.

Tenchuusatsu was a word even I was not aware of until yesterday, so even if another word were added on top of that, it would only cause me further confusion.

"Simply put, from the moment you were born, you have been living a life of misfortunes." Ibuki explained to me.

"That is again an amazing thing..."

Whether or not this is pure coincidence, it was once again accurate. It's just, the fortune-telling was still ambiguous in regards to this matter.

Because if one looks at themselves pessimistically, there's no shortage of people who would look back and think of their lives as being unlucky. But if it's the unusual Tenchuusatsu, it would be a risk for the fortune-teller to say that as well.

"By the way, is that fateful Tenchuusatsu going to continue from here on out too?" I asked.

"Just a while ago, that girl over said it meant living a life of misfortunes, but that is wrong."

"That girl..."

"Fateful Tenchuusatsu is indeed uncommon. But that doesn't mean it curses your entire life to be misfortunate. Indeed the flow itself is bad, you will be unable to receive blessing of a family or parents. But that's only up to your personality. What you will do from now on is something you yourself must decide." the fortune-teller told me.

From the sharp expression she had earlier, now in the fortune-teller's eyes I could see benevolence.

"There's no need to feel pessimistic and there's no need to act like the protagonist of a comedy too." she told me.

I've heard quite a lot of interesting stories today, but after all it's just fortune-telling. It's not something that causes you to look with bloodshot eyes or tilt your ears to hear better.

When I tried to get up from my seat, I was again called by the fortune-teller.

"One more prediction for you. Go back straight instead of taking any detours. If you take a detour unnecessarily, you may be stuck for a long time. But even if you get stuck do not panic. Stay calm and if you cooperate, you should be able to overcome that too." the fortune-teller told me.

She left behind such words of prophecy.

* * *

"How was it, your first fortune-telling experience?"

"How about you?"

"Mostly satisfied. That fortune-teller is quite famous around the world. It's said that the accuracy is quite high as well." Ibuki told me.

"I suppose so...it looks like a simple profession but it's surprisingly difficult."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ibuki asks.

More than half of it was just based off a template, the images and words one normally hears in fortune-telling. But within that, there is no denying that there were also accurate facts.

And that is something she could not have divined using only the keywords I had provided her with. I can no longer simply write it off as something one gains from living a long life or having fortune-telling experience.

"From now on, I won't write it off as mere fortune-telling anymore. That's how I feel." I told Ibuki.

"Ahh. I see."

That was a rather disinterested answer despite her having been the one to ask me. And together, we arrived at a nearby elevator.

"Geh...it's crowded again."

If I continue on it's hell and if I turn back it's still hell. Students flooded the space in front of the elevator.

"Sorry but I'll be taking a detour to head back." I told Ibuki.

"Me too." she promptly replies.

It seems Ibuki too, is thinking along a similar train of thought as me.

And as the two of us head towards a distant elevator, the words of the fortune-teller came back into my head.

"Speaking of which, earlier..."

"The fortune-teller told us, don't take a detour."

For a brief moment, I met eyes with Ibuki.

Whether it is simply a coincidence or inevitability, we were about to take a detour at this very moment.

"I suppose it might be interesting. Let's find out how accurate that prediction is."

If it's not, I would be able to go back without anything happening. And I would be able to think it's just mere fortune-telling in the end.

But in the end, without anything happening, we reached the distant elevator. And at the time, there was no one around us. We were able to call up the elevator at our leisure.

"Are you fine with the 1st floor?"

"I'm going back like that." Ibuki replied.

It seems we won't have the same path back and so I pressed the button for the 1st floor and closed the elevator doors.

The elevator begins to move slowly.

Since we no longer have anything in particular to talk to each other about, we spent the elevator ride in silence.

But when I said move, it was only briefly. Since when the 3rd floor light lit up, the elevator grinded to a halt with a heavy sound.

It doesn't seem like it's someone trying to get into the elevator on the 3rd floor too but the elevator, in its attempt to descend further from the 3rd floor, came to a stop halfway.

But as I mulled over it, for an instant, the lights went out and it became pitch black.

However, at that moment, the emergency lights came back on and we were able to avoid a complete blackout situation.

"Could it be a blackout?" Ibuki asks.

"Most likely."

There are not many people who have personally experienced elevator breakdowns like this. If this is the unexpected setback the fortune-teller predicted, in a sense it hit the mark.

"For now, shouldn't the emergency phone suffice?"

There is no need for panic here. The elevator already has been prepared for breakdown situations like this. There are also surveillance cameras in the elevator, and emergency buttons (an intercom which connects the elevator to a disaster prevention center) and such have already been installed.

And having told her that, with no objections, Ibuki leaned back on the elevator wall...I suppose I'll press the button and call for help.

I did that, however---

"There's no response."

I don't know if the call is ringing on the other end or not but, I don't feel like I'm getting through to the disaster prevention center.

"Isn't it that blackouts also prevent the calls?" Ibuki asked me.

"No. Elevators usually have a backup battery that can run for several hours. As evidence of that, the emergency lights are on right now. That means it must be some other internal fault in the elevator." I replied to her.

I tried pressing the button for the hearing-impaired to use, but that too did not respond. In other words, the operation panel the buttons are installed on itself is broken.

Batteries are running and the air conditioning is working as well. That alone is a blessing, but what to do now?

"Can you contact the school with your phone? It should be in range." I asked Ibuki.

"Sorry. But please do it yourself." she replied to me.

"I can understand your feeling of not wanting to talk with people, but isn't this much fine?"

"...seriously."

Ibuki muttered as she brought out her phone with a displeased expression.

But when she looked at her screen, her expression changed to a bad one.

She then turns the screen to show me. On the screen was a notification that signalled battery shortage, and soon the power ran out in her phone.

"Because I don't have any contacts in my phone, I didn't even notice until the battery ran out. So, you call instead." Ibuki tells me.

"No choice."

Taking out my own phone, I looked once at the screen and immediately froze up.

"Call now, quickly." Ibuki rushed me.

"It seems the situation is a lot more serious than I expected." I told her.

Just like what Ibuki did earlier, this time, I show Ibuki the screen of my phone.

The battery percentage showing on the phone was a measly remaining 4%. It was like the flame at the top of a lighthouse that could disappear at any moment from the wind.

"You really messed with me." Ibuki told me.

"It's a lot like you. Since I don't have a lot of people I can

talk to, I didn't care whether I had battery left or not." I replied.

"No, no. We really are in trouble now. You're a useless man."

"You're really harsh even though we're both the same...the problem is where to call now, huh?" I asked Ibuki.

I could call the police or emergency services, but something about that seemed off to me.

If it's still within the school grounds, there should be someplace else I could call. And thinking that, I began looking to see if I could find the contact for the elevator's emergency services.

As I did, near the elevator's operation board, there was a 10-digit number.

But---it must have been someone's idea of causing mischief, but the last 4 digits were painted over.

"This kind of prank is too much..."

"Why don't you call one of your friends and ask for help?" Ibuki then asks me.

"Friend, huh?"

It seems there's no other choice, but the problem is who to call.

"If everything goes well, then it's Horikita." I said.

"Rejected." Ibuki immediately replied.

"...I thought you'd say that".

"If you call her, it would mean she would come and save me. Don't joke around." Ibuki told me.

I don't think it's important who is doing the saving in this scenario though. And it's not like it was Ibuki's fault too, it's just an elevator breakdown so there's no need to worry on that front too.

I suppose she simply doesn't like showing her weakness in front of her rival.

"You don't want it to become an uproar, if we do that."

Ibuki nods slightly in response.

So in other words, someone who would help us without causing an uproar while doing their utmost.

That means the 3 idiots are out of the question already. In an event like this, it wouldn't be surprising if they start trumpeting this around here and there.

But even if I rely on someone who won't go around spreading this like Sakura, resolving this situation would be difficult for her.

It would be inconvenient for her to contact an adult and I would just end up causing her trouble.

In that same sense, Kushida and Karuizawa would also be unsuited to this sort of thing. Someone who can come and help us without raising a fuss.

And in this case, the one I can rely on is---

"In this case."

In my contacts list, the one person I can rely on right now will have to be none other than that man.

"I'll respect your wishes. But you have to leave the rest to me now." I told Ibuki.

"As long as it's not Horikita I'm fine with it." Ibuki promptly replies to me.

I then began to call a certain man. And a few seconds after the call had begun to ring, that reserved man quietly answers the call.

I told him of my situation and asked him to help us. But not long after I started the conversation, my phone quietly blacked out.

"Battery's gone." I told Ibuki.

"Did you tell him properly?"

"Maybe."

Now all I can do is sit and wait. There is no need to rush.

Sooner or later, surely someone will realize this situation too. Even if we try to escape from the elevator like in the movies, it will only lead to more danger.

But the situation seems to be progressing in an unexpected way.

And as I thought I heard the deep sound made by the machine reverberating inside the elevator, the cooler that was sending a comfortable breeze into the room stopped.

"This can't be real..."

Ibuki, who had been calm up until now, started to panic.

We were in a sealed space in the middle of summer, it wasn't a stretch to imagine that the temperature will start to rise in here.

Right now the air inside the elevator had become slightly lukewarm but given time, whether we like it or not we would inevitably begin sweating.

"Is there any way to get out ourselves?" Ibuki asked me.

"The rescue hatch seems to be there but..."

Nowadays this seems to be decreasing, but there is an exit built into the elevator's ceiling.

It's a familiar thing usually seen in movies, but escaping through it in reality is---

"How are we supposed to open that?"

Ibuki, who was looking up, inevitably asked that question.

Normally, the rescue hatch cannot be opened from the inside. It is there so that in the scenario where rescuers are unable to open the sealed elevator, they can use it as a last resort to rescue the people trapped inside.

"I think it's better not to do anything and just wait. It's a

rule to do that in the case of an elevator emergency." I told her in response.

That is the safest and surest way.

"If you can handle this steam bath sure." Ibuki fired back.

And while we were trading an unproductive exchange back and forth, the temperature had risen.

I can understand the impulse to get out of here, but I'd like to avoid making poor decisions. I took off my coat as I sat down on the floor.

In situations like this, the thing to do is to not raise your own body temperature.

"How about you sit down too? If it's too hot, you can strip too." I told her.

"....huh? Are you perhaps thinking something lewd in this situation?" Ibuki asks me.

It seems Ibuki interpreted my words that way and her guard went up.

"I heard you were able to fight equally with Horikita. There's no way I could possibly beat someone like you." I told Ibuki.

"That's true, but..."

"Of course, if you are going to strip, I'm going to turn my back to you so relax." I continued.

"I'm not going to strip."

Having said she would not do it, Ibuki then sat down on the spot.

After that, we waited for about 30 minutes patiently but there was no contact from the outside.

"This is bad..."

I muttered that after hearing Ibuki's breath turn coarse beside me.

We began to perspire on our foreheads. And the sweat that came out of our heads, soaked our hair and started to drip.

The shirt I'm wearing already looks like it's been under a waterfall, it seems the situation is a lot more dangerous than I had imagined.

Thinking back on it, this elevator is installed into the wall of Keyaki Mall. Thanks to the air-conditioning that's always on normally, I didn't notice it but this location would be very sensitive to heat under these conditions.

There have been incidents of children dying in the middle of summer after being locked in a car, but the same is also true for adults. And as it were, the heat stroke had started to attack us.

"Ahh, I'm at my limit already. Move!"

Feeling frustrated, Ibuki stood up and with all her might she kicked away at the interior of the elevator, leaving a dent in the place she kicked.

She kicks the same place again. The elevator swayed

slightly but showed no signs of movement.

"You're just wasting your energy...but then again, I really can't say just sitting still is the safe option anymore." I told Ibuki.

Even if a person notices the elevator breakdown in 5 minutes, it would still take the rescue crew roughly 30 minutes to make it to our location. If it's coming, it should be time for the rescue to arrive.

If we remain in here after that time has passed, we cannot avoid suffering a heat stroke. And in some cases, it could become a life-threatening risk too.

Since it's come to this, I can no longer say contuining to sit still is the correct decision anymore.

"There's no other choice..."

I refuse to die in this sauna of an elevator.

"Should we kick from the front? Hey, should we kick?" Ibuki asked me.

Having already lost her coolness from the heat and seems to be desperately suppressing her impulse to go berserk.

"Leaving aside getting out or not for now, let's try opening the hatch at the top." I told her.

Right now, the most important thing is escaping this sealed scenario. Even if we cannot get out, as long as the hatch opens up that would be enough.

"The height should be---slightly more than 2 meters, about 2.2 or 2.3 meters."

Even if I reach up with my hands, naturally I would not be able to reach it.

"Move."

Ibuki threateningly glared at me as I measured the height of the hatch.

Then she jumped up from right underneath the hatch. It was a magnificent vertical jump. She then extended her right hand towards the ceiling, and pushed up with all her strength.

But the hatch didn't seem to show any signs of opening, and from the impact of Ibuki landing back on the floor, the elevator swayed wildly.

"...it looks like it's stuck."

"I suppose so."

If it was just closed like a lid, with that just now, it should have opened up.

"You predicted it's locked. But if so, what's the locking mechanism for it?" Ibuki asks me.

"I wonder. I think it's locked using a padlock but...is something the matter?"

In regards to that subject, I wasn't sure too.

"I'm kicking it." Ibuki said.

"No, wait. Surely that's impossible."

I'm not sure whether or not she's just that confident in her kicking techniques but it's not something one can easily kick.

"That hatch is the emergency hatch, right? That means it's connected to the outside. That's why rescuers can open it up from the outside, that means it's a door that opens outwards from here as far as I can tell. The force needed for that should also be minimal." Ibuki told me.

It's not like I couldn't understand what she was going on about, but the situation is the situation.

In the first place, since the hatch is located on the ceiling, forget kicking it would be difficult for her legs to even hit it.

"I won't know for sure unless I try it." Ibuki then said.

It seems Ibuki wants to escape from this heat as quickly as possible as she starts looking at the walls left and right.

Don't tell me she wants to do a triangular jump by kicking off the walls. If it's her, I'm sure she would think of something like that, but I can't let her to do that.

"...I could say it's exactly as foretold, but it seems the fortune-teller's prediction came true, huh?"

"Huh? What was that again?"

"That old lady said it, right? Even if we suffer a setback, do not panic. And cooperate with each other."

I glanced at the location where the buttons of the elevator

are located.

"The emergency button didn't respond. I wonder about the other buttons."

Since the light for the 1st floor was still lit, thinking about it, at least part of the battery is still working. I tried pressing the 2nd floor button as a test. And when I did, the light for the 2nd floor also lit up.

It may be that only the lights are still active but it's worth a try. I then start pressing buttons at random.

"It's useless, apparently."

After having pushed all the buttons, Ibuki said again as if reminding me.

"There's no other choice but to kick." she said.

"No. There's still another way. Elevators have something like a cancel command in them, right?"

It's not like I'm an expert on elevators, but that alone was trivia I knew from something. It was a way to cancel the command when I mistakenly pressed a lower floor button by mistake.

I think the command defers depending on the manufacturer, but I continue to repeatedly press the cancel button, or it was supposed to be. But having left the 2nd floor button as it is, the yellow light was lit up in suddenly blinked out.

"There must be some commands that are available in

limited express mode..."

"Limited express...?"

"For instance, let's say this is the 3rd floor. If there's someone who wishes to get off on the 2nd floor they press that button, it will stop on the 2nd floor. But if you use the limited express command, it will ignore those previous commands and go straight to the 1st floor." I told Ibuki.

But I don't know whether whether this limited express command is installed on this elevator or not.

"The problem is finding a way..."

"Is it worth a try?" Ibuki asks.

"It's better than doing the difficult task of kicking the ceiling." I replied to her.

But, I don't think the elevator will start moving just by that. I just said that to buy time and change the subject by giving hope to Ibuki who was on the verge of losing her rationality.

"Lend me your wits, too. This kind of command also might be revealed by different individual's thoughts too. If you give me your ideas too, it might unexpectedly succeed." I told Ibuki.

I then pressed the button for the 1st floor repeatedly and then after that I tried pressing all the buttons for all the floors.

But none of them caused the elevator to react.

"Let's switch."

"...understood."

Ibuki then joins in and starts working in front of the buttons. It seems it's necessary to consider the possibility that help really won't be coming.

It's not like I wanted to use Ibuki's idea but I need to consider that kicking down the front door may be necessary. Even if breaking it open is impossible, I might be able to open up a small opening for a human to crawl through.

I'm not an expert on elevators, but as long as escape to the outside is possible, anything goes. It's just, if possible, I would like to get out without having to reveal that sort of strength.

"I couldn't cancel, but I don't think you can get the limited express command just through a combination of buttons that gets used daily." Ibuki said.

Of course, using common sense that is obvious.

Children sometimes like to play around by mashing the buttons after all. And if the elevator enters limited express mode each and every time, it would inconvenience the other passengers.

In other words, the possibility that we won't find that mode with the usual combinations alone is quite high, or that's Ibuki's reasoning at least.

"That might be a good idea...then it might be better to include complex combinations too." I told her.

For example, after pressing a sequence like 1, 6, 5, 5, 4, 2, 4 I could then press the floor I'd like to go to. But that would be hard for people to memorize and it would impose a strict height requirement of at least 6 floors.

It would be strange unless one can use it with an elevator that only goes up to 3 floors.

"We should also try using the emergency buttons."

If it reacts only by being pressed, it would be difficult to use it as a command.

"So in other words...1 or 2 or 3. Close and open on 5?"

"We should assume it's made up of that kind of combination."

But, if there are more combinations than that it would be very difficult to test them all. So Ibuki continues to test the set patterns.

And as I watched her do it, I excluded the combinations that failed to work.

"Ahh---it's getting hot."

Gan! Ibuki punches the wall with her fists as if to dissipate her frustration that the heat has caused.

Normally, I would give her another warning against this, but since she's satisfied with that alone I decided to leave it be.

"...it's not opening. Haven't you tried everything yet?"

"More or less everything. If there's anything left..."

Since there's still a possibility, I decided to try out the command I haven't tested yet.

"Why don't you try pressing the destination floor and the close button at the same time?"

"Close button?...I got it."

While thinking there's no way it could be, Ibuki tried a combination that had not been tested yet.

And when she pressed it, although I thought it wouldn't work, at that very moment the elevator started to slowly move again.

We both immediately looked at each other.

And in a few seconds the elevator reached the 1st floor and the doors slowly opened. A cool breeze flowed into the elevator, two adults who changed their expressions turned to look at us.

"Are you two ok? Are you injured?"

"Ahh. No we aren't injured. It was just hot in there."

Just by looking at how sweaty we were it's easy to guess how hot it was. Perhaps the adults realized it too but immediately we were presented with sports drinks.

And then, just in case too, we were instructed to head over to the medical center for treatment.

"Umm. Can we ask something? Could it be the elevator

moved---"

"Yeah. We operated it from here."

Apparently there is a special remote control that can be operated from the 1st floor, it seems it was thanks to using the limited express mode from here. And we just happened to use that combination with the same timing.

"...you must have had a difficult time."

"Really it was disastrous. I've had enough of fortune-telling for a while."

It's not like I didn't understand Ibuki's feelings for saying that.

I then expressed my gratitude to the adults, and the man who was watching from a distance then approached us.

"Are you alright, Ayanokouji?" he asked me.

The big man that approached had a familiar aura about him and asked me that with a worried voice.

"You saved us. You managed to bring us down."

The elevator stopping caused some trouble. But it seems it did not cause a noticeable uproar.

This man, Katsuragi, probably managed to do that for us.

"The information you told me through the phone was enough. This is good enough right?" he asked me.

"I have to go to the medical center now. Please let me

repay you some other time." I told Katsuragi.

"You don't need to. I myself was helped a great deal by you, and also Sudou. Since we are from different classes, there is a line that absolutely cannot be crossed for us. But if we can get along despite that, it's a most welcome thing." Katsuragi replied to me.

"It looks like that went well then."

"Yeah. Sudou answered my expectations brilliantly. Please tell him again that I appreciate it a lot." Katsuragi said.

"I got it."

"And also, Ayanokouji. I must also thank you. Even though prior evidence was prepared, there should have been some resistance at least before agreeing with the request I had made." he continued.

He bowed his head as if in apology towards me. But I'm feeling just as grateful right now though.

If I were stuck for any longer in that elevator, I would have surely lost my cool.

"If there's anything you need again, please contact me. If I can be of any help, I will cooperate. Other than exams."

Katsuragi laughs briefly and leaves while leaving behind a joke like that for me.

And before I knew it, I was becoming close to Katsuragi. Almost as close as the 3 idiots, perhaps even more than that.

Why did I know the contact address of Class A's Katsuragi, and why was I so close to him?

---That is a story from a while ago.

Chapter 02: Katsuragi Kohei is surprisingly troubled

A lot of the time, I think Japanese people are very tolerant in regards to religion.

Of course, leaving aside what it was like in the past, in modern times, nobody cares what religion you choose to practice and you are free to do so. Even if you choose to have no faith, that in itself is no problem too.

However, even though they do not care about religion, in regards to certain events like birthdays or Christmas, there is no denying that they are influenced by the faith of Christianity.

Of course, you could say it derives from the faith of those people, but one can also say that the success of companies also depends on those events. In recent years, the rising trend of celebrating Halloween can also be attributed to that flow.

What I mean by all this is---for this school, birthdays are also a huge event.

In shopping malls and convenience stores on school grounds, there are surely corners being set up for all these events.

The thing is, this particular incident happened a week before Ibuki and I would be stuck in an elevator together.

It was a chat I received from Kushida, the healer of our class.

[Actually, next week Wednesday is Inokashira-san's birthday it seems. If you're ok with it, would you celebrate it with us?] she texted me.

That sort of message had been sent to our chat group, in fact.

Inokashira, by the way, is plain and quiet girl from Class D. A type similar to Sakura. She doesn't have many friends, so the story here is to make friends with her for her birthday event.

Of course, for Ike who received the same message, there was no reason to refuse. Because it's blatantly obvious he has taken a liking to Kushida.

He must want to use this event to get even slightly closer to Kushida.

"You got a message from Kikyo-chan too, right? Let's prepare some presents for Kokoro-chan!"

Ike did everything he could to get us to give our consent, but Yamauchi's response was slow.

"But even if you say that, I don't have money.....I should be getting more next month though." Yamauchi said.

That's right, the students of Class D are basically broke right now.

In the special exams that took place a while ago, certain results were achieved and certain students were promised a large amount of private points but sadly those points will only be handed out on the 1st of September.

I had used up most of my points and so currently I have almost no remaining balance.

In other words, I will have to overcome the summer vacation using this current poor man's lifestyle. In that case, inevitably I would have no room to spare points for someone's birthday.

Or rather, on that premise, these guys were individually planning out their birthday presents. If it's a close friend that would be another matter but I don't have any male acquaintances that also get along with Inokashira.

But even if it happens to be a cheap present, Inokashira should still be able to accept it if the presents come in large numbers.

"Isn't it ok if the guys pool their points to buy one present? In that case, even if it's for 500 points we should be able to buy something proper for her." I proposed that to them.

If so, even Yamauchi should be able to accept that too but it seems his financial situation is just the bare minimum. It seems to be truly cut short and he himself is being forced to live a life of poverty.

The points awarded at the start of August is 8700 private points. Even using Japanese yen as a standard, it still amounts to 8700 yen.

Even though from the perspective of high school students, it may be somewhat lacking, even so, if one does not become wasteful there is still room to work with it.

Fortunately enough, the school provides free meals and

drinking water is also free. In other words, if one does not waste anything, it's possible to survive without using a single yen.

However, most of the students often run out of money as the end of the month approaches. It's no different from when we received 100,000 points every month at the time of our enrollment. What I mean by all this is, people desire to spend as much as they have.

In the end, the three of them ended up agreeing with my proposition and we decided to buy the present at a later date.

* * *

I wiped the sweat off my forehead, feeling the intense heat.

"And---why is the actually crucial Kikyo-chan not here? Huh, Ayanokouji?!"

And the first thing Ike asked me when I met up with him was asking me about the absence of Kushida.

But I'd like him to not ask me that. Both Horikita and Kushida, it's not like I'm monitoring both their schedules.

I think it's only probably because I'm an easy target for them to vent their frustrations on, but I'm also rather sick of this kind of interaction.

"Think about it calmly, Kushida never said she'd go along with us. It's probably just that." I replied to him.

"I'm not going to be satisfied with just that excuse! If Kikyo-chan is not here, there's no meaning to this." Ike said.

That's going too far. I'd like him to stop rejecting this gathering.

Leaving aside Ike and the others who were getting overly excited on their own, it seems Kushida invited her other girl friends and went out shopping.

"So I have no choice but to go pre-shopping with a bunch of bastards that I'm not even interested in, that's sad!" Ike continued.

I can understand his feelings in wanting to scream out, but I too, don't wish to go out together with a bunch of sad men like this...and although I am saying this, I found myself enjoying it just a little bit too.

Over the course of the summer vacation, other than the school lesson (examination), it was my first time hanging out with other men. But it seems they consider it normal to go shopping with friends and watching movies with them.

"Screw going out shopping sadly with these three bastards. Haruki, I'm leaving the rest up to you. Choose an item that Kokoro-chan would love" Ike said.

"Don't joke around. You were the one who suggested this, live up to your own words." Yamauchi retorted to him.

Those two exchanging complaints. I got in between Ike and Yamauchi who were in the middle of their conflict.

"Calm down a bit. It'll be fine if the three of us just go and buy it. Sudou's already entrusted us with his portion of the points too." I told them.

"That's true, but I feel like we don't need all three of us to do it."

"We've already come this far. We can just quickly buy it and go back."

Since if we disband now I'd feel slightly lonely, I tried persuading them with those words.

"It'll be more of a waste of time and energy if we keep arguing in this scorching heat." I told them.

"Ahhhh---fine, I got it. Let's just quickly buy and go back. Ahh---this is boring."

Contrary to those two who had completely lost their excitement, I headed towards the shop with a slight excitement.

Even among the shops one does not normally enter alone, we came in particular to a shop where girls frequently spend their time.

The clerk was a high-level, older beauty. And furthermore, the interior of the shop was colored all pink. It exudes an aura that would normally prevent a man from coming here alone.

It seems ranging from stuffed toys to cell phone accessories, all things unnecessary for studies are on display here. I suppose this can be considered as exploiting private points from the students.

"I suppose since those points are also being issued to us from the school there's no real loss." I muttered.

"What are you going on about? Help us decide what to buy too."

What I'm thinking is that the two of you should feel ashamed, looking at the beautiful clerk and the other female customers in the shop. Even though you both claimed to hate doing this, you sure changed your opinions quickly.

After that we split up and circled the shop to find a good birthday present to buy. But of course, from the start I had no intention of choosing the birthday present. It was because I had no idea what would make a good present or not to choose from.

"What would she like...I have no idea."

This is my first time giving someone a birthday present. But since the three of us were collectively buying this present, it's a blurry line when it comes to whether or not it fits in the category of a "first" for me.

In any case, I am inexperienced in regards to this. In addition to that, my knowledge of the matter is shallow, and the only things I could think of as appropriate gifts were "bonquet of roses" and "ring". Things that are far separated from common sense. But that was no longer just a birthday present but a proposal to the girl.

After circling the shop once, I rendezvoused with Yamauchi. In Yamauchi's hands was a small, white stuffed bear. On the other hand, I was holding a cell phone cover in my hands.

And upon seeing that, Yamauchi scowls at me.

"You know, drop that cell phone cover stuff. First of all, Kokoro-chan already absolutely has one and the level of preference between those covers is huge so it'd be troublesome for her too." I received such a warning from Yamauchi.

"...I see. Then how about this protective film?" I asked him.

As a backup measure, I brought out something else I had chosen. But when I did, Yamauchi's facial expression turned into a frown.

"No, no, no. That's something she doesn't need. Ayanokouji, you really don't have a sense for this kind of thing."

"But things like stuffed animals, wouldn't that be a real problem for her?" I asked Yamauchi.

Even if she gets a stuffed animal it does not fulfill any purpose. It simply takes up space in her room.

"Sure it may be a problem for her, but she can use it to decorate her room's interior. Kokoro-chan likes this white bear series of stuffed animals so I think she'll be happy with this. More like, I don't want to hear that from a man who bought a cell phone cover and a protective film." Yamauchi retorted.

When I was mocked by Yamauchi like that I don't know why but...it was really a shock.

But I was honestly impressed that Yamauchi had thoroughly researched the tastes of the person we were buying a gift for. As for me, I had enough trouble matching

Inokashira's name to her face, and I could clearly feel the difference in the level of friendship between us.

"So where's Kanji?"

"I wonder---"

When the two of us looked through the shop for him, we found Ike standing by the keychain corner. He seemed to be strangely serious, so without calling out to him we approached him in silence.

It seems Ike is holding in his hands so-called character goods with an orange motif on it. But in his hands, Ike was already holding something else, a cloth with the white bear that Yamauchi had printed on it.

"Oi, Kanji."

"Uwaaa?! D-don't surprise me like that." Ike said.

Having heard us call out to him, the surprised Ike panicked and almost dropped the keychain he was holding. And then, for some reason almost as if to hide it, he immediately returns it to the shelf.

"H-have you already decided?" he asks us.

"Ahh, I thought we'd go with this. A white bear towel. Hahaha..."

"That's not it. Why were you looking at keychains?"

"Ehh? It's not like I have any secret motives or anything. More importantly, let's go see what's over there." Ike replied.

In response to the Ike who tried to change the subject like that, Yamauchi turned his eyes in suspicion.

"Hey...if I remember right, the one who liked that orange character. Wasn't it Shinohara?" he asked Ike.

Once again, Shinohara was an unexpected name to hear here. She's a girl from Class D too and during the island test, I recall she fought frequently with Ike regarding their opinions.

"R-really? No, I was just thinking about Kikyo-chan is all. That's really all there is to it." Ike replied to Yamauchi.

He did say that, but I could clearly see Ike's unrest as he said that.

"You, it can't be but are you thinking about Shinohara?" Yamauchi again asked Ike.

"Huuuuuh? Definitely not, that ugly girl! I'm absolutely not thinking about her!" Ike quickly retorted.

Indeed, if compared to someone like Kushida, it might be the case but Shinohara is also a girl who's plenty cute. Her personality surely isn't the best but that too could be counted as part of her charm.

"Are you telling the truth? Something seems fishy here, right Ayanokouji?" Yamauchi turned to ask me.

"I wonder.....it certainly wasn't a very Ike-like response." I told him.

Even though he had a welcoming attitude towards all the other girls, Ike seemed to blatantly dislike Shinohara.

In a sense, that means it can be taken as proof that he is conscious about Shinohara. But it doesn't seem like Ike is keen on admitting that, he was vehemently denying it.

"You guys, don't misunderstand this. Listen up, about Shinohara. If I go out with a girl with an attitude as bad as she has and as ugly as she is, I would be so embarrassed I wouldn't be able to go outside anymore. I absolutely refuse." Ike denied it.

"Ahh---".

Yamauchi and I both realized a certain presence at the same time and panickedly tried to change the subject.

"I got it, I got it. We already get it. Let's choose Kokoro-chan's present."

"No, you still don't understand. The degree to which I think Shinohara is ugly. Please listen. Firstly, it's not just her face that's ugly but also her personality. And on top of it all, her body is also lacking. In any case, it's like she's the ugliest among the uglies---" Ike continued.

"W-we understand that. Cut it out already, Kanji. Because, behind you---" Yamauchi trailed off.

"Huh? Behind?"

The Ike who had been going on about how much he hated Shinohara passionately, slowly turned around.

When he did, he saw the form of Shinohara who seemed to almost be breathing fire as well as her group of friends. And amongst them, there was also Kushida.

I suppose it was only natural. If they were intending on picking a birthday present for Inokashira, it would be no surprise if they also happened to pick the same place.

"Ike should just go and die!"

Leaving behind those violent words, Shinohara angrily left the shop.

It seems Ike, who was left behind, didn't even have the words to reply to her since he only absentmindedly stared at the leaving back of Shinohara.

"W-w-what does she mean by die? Shit, she's saying too much for being just someone ugly. R-right?"

Ike said that while trying to project a calm image to us despite having received a shock.

We couldn't interject strongly here, so all we could do was slightly agree with him.

"O-oi. Ayanokouji look at this, there's a baldie here!"

Yamauchi, who had been attempting to lighten the mood up by changing the subject, suddenly said that while shrugging his shoulders.

He did say there was someone bald here, but as soon as I thought that I was convinced of it.

In this cute shop, an incongruous giant of man was looking at a shelf stacked with goods with his back faced towards us.

It was Katsuragi of Class A.

He was wandering through the shop with a sharp and angry expression.

"Think he's here to shoplift?"

Whatever happens, I doubt he'll do something like that. But without thinking, I ended up hiding myself along with Ike and the others to watch the situation.

The reason I took this action was because I was also curious partly because of his appearance.

"Perhaps that's the case."

If you think of it that way, perhaps you might be convinced. It seems Katsuragi is buying a present for someone as he came here after all.

And it seems like he's attempting to purchase something now. It seems he's being cautious of his surroundings because he doesn't wish for others to realize this fact.

GIFT

Eventually, Katsuragi chose one box and then started to head for the counter.

Ike and the others finally leaped out of the shadows and gathered in front of the shelf from which Katsuragi chose his present.

It seemed to be something with the shape of a thin board stacked up one over another. Ike and the others took it into their hands and turned it around to read the product information on the back.

"This is...chocolate, right?"

It's safe to assume it's a present Katsuragi bought with the intention of giving it to someone. It was supposed to have only been that, but Ike and the others trembled as if mesmerized by something.

"I-it can't be. That baldie already has a girlfriend?"

"Seriously? So this is the power of Class A!"

It seems from something this trivial, they were both mesmerized and jealous and those feelings were laid bare here.

"That's not really the case though. It might just be a present to a friend."

"You normally won't give a friend a present with a wrapping this cute. Would you? Would you!? You wouldn't."

"...I suppose."

Indeed it is a cute little box, the ribbon that's on the package isn't really something you would hand to a friend...

At the very least, it's not something you would hand to a member of the same sex. So going from that, it would have to be an intimate girl he's giving it to. If I think of it that way, the idea of him having a lover that was suggested to me, I would inevitably be drawn to think of that as a possibility.

Ike and the others once again glance at the Katsuragi who was still advancing towards the counter, and from the shadows of the shelves, continue their information collecting.

"Is it a birthday present?"

"Yes."

"Will you be attaching a birthday card to this?"

"Please. The birthday is August 29."

Katsuragi answered the clerk's questions.

I wonder whose present it is? In any case, it seems the product itself is meant to be a birthday present.

Having overheard that too, Ike and the others began to whisper amongst themselves.

"Did you hear that? Which girl has her birthday on the 29th?"

"I-I don't know...today is the 21st and it's a Sunday so...it'll be the Monday of the week after the next. Do you know anything, Ayanokouji?"

"I wonder. I have entirely no idea." I replied.

If even those two, who have completely familiarized themselves with the girls don't know, there is no way I could possibly know of it too.

* * *

"Hey...I've already given up since I've been saying this over and over but why is it my room?"

At night, for some reason, after eating dinner each individual member of the usual group gathered in my room.

Ike and Yamauchi were naturally here as promised, but also Kushida and Sudou who had finished his club activities were also here.

It would be perfect if Horikita were also here.

"Kikyo-chan, do you know the birthdays of any other girl?"

"Yeah. I've pretty much memorized it from all the girls I've heard from so I know more or less. Whose birthday do you want to know?"

"The thing is, it might not be someone from Class D."

"Umm, if it's about senior students then I really don't know much but if it's only about the 1st years I might know." Kushida answered him.

As expected of Kushida, who has mastered the art of worldly wisdom. She seems to have recorded the birthday dates as to not forget them.

"Then tell me one thing, which girls have their birthday on the 29th of this month?"

"A girl with a birthday on the 29th? Give me a moment."

Having brought out her phone, it seems Kushida is going through what is probably a birthday list. And after that, she scrolled across the screen for a while but after a while, she raised her head.

"Sorry. It doesn't seem to be anyone I know of" she said.

"I think it's probably a girl from Class A."

"Class A? Hmm, I've already heard all their birthdays though."

Even so, she doesn't seem to know the birthday of the girl that would be taking place the day after tomorrow.

"If it's a 1st year girl I thought I'd know though, I can't think of anyone."

If even Kushida's overwhelming social network could not place a name to that person it probably means the person receiving the gift would have to be from a different school year.

If that is the case, even Kushida won't know and we were unable to get the answer we were looking for.

"Does that mean the chances of it being a senior student are high?"

Ike threw up his arms helplessly with that statement and

fell on his back.

"Is there something wrong with that person born on the 29th?" Kushida asked Ike.

And in response to her simple question, Ike replied to her in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Listen to this~. You know the baldie from Class A Katsuragi right?"

"Yep. Katsuragi-kun is the one who's responsible for organizing everyone in his class so he's quite famous. In the test earlier I was in the same group as him." Kushida replied.

"The thing is, that baldie's going to be giving someone a birthday present on the 29th. For a baldie that's not too shabby."

After hearing Ike repeat the keyword 'baldie' many times over, Kushida gave him a warning to be careful---

"Katsuragi-kun suffered from a sickness when he was little leaving him with complete hair loss. You better not tease him." Kushida warned.

"Uuuuu...."

Having been scolded by Kushida like that, Ike who was elated just a while ago quickly backed down and went silent.

Indeed, we were too excited to notice that the lack of hair, aside from being a fashion statement, could only have been a result of sickness.

The act of mocking the sick is a shameful one, and Ike himself should have realized this. Just playing it up for cheap laughs because it was an easy point to mock seems to have backfired and lowered his likability.

"Right? From now on, let's call him properly by his name ok?"

"O-of course, sorry Kikyo-chan. I made you feel uncomfortable."

"It's ok, as long as you understand. If you're going to fix that attitude from now on I'd be glad."

But after that conversation had ended, it seems she still has something to say to us since Kushida, without wasting any time, continued to talk.

"And also, about what happened today with Shinohara-san---"

"Uuuuu...."

It seems Ike who have preferred to forget that ever happened, but since Kushida was bringing up the subject, he could not stop her either.

"I don't even have to tell you, right?" she asked him.

And without delving into the subject itself, she simply said that kindly.

"...I'll apologize" Ike said.

"Right. If you do that, I'm sure Shinohara-san will also

forgive you."

Although he seemed dissatisfied with it, Ike still honestly said that in front of Kushida. And towards Yamauchi, who was giggling at him, Ike sent a hateful glare.

But leaving that aside, thanks to Kushida, it seems Ike was able to mature slightly.

"And? You were talking about Katsuragi-kun giving someone a birthday present, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. I was wondering if Kikyo-chan would know anything about it."

It seems Kushida is utilizing her social network and searching for any clues inside her head, but it seems she wasn't able to find anything since after a while, she simply shook her head.

"I wonder, I don't really think Katsuragi-kun has that sort of image about him."

At least not yet, she added.

"Is there a chance that it could be a senior student?"

"That's right, there are still a lot that I don't know about after all."

It would be amazing if he was able to go out with a senior student not too long after enrolling, or giving them a birthday present. I honestly wish to offer my respects to the Class A leader.

However, I wonder if it would be ok if we narrowed down the search to only senior students at this stage.

It seems approaching this matter from a different perspective is necessary, but the mood has already switched to finding his girlfriend.

"Since it's come to this, let's find out who's Katsuragi's girlfriend!"

I feel bad for interrupting them while they're in high spirits but it would be prudent to point out that there is still another possibility.

"Is it really ok to conclude that it's a senior student?"

"But Kikyo-chan already said she doesn't know any girl whose birthday is the 29th so there's really no other option besides that, right? Or is it that? By any chance, could it be Horikita-san?"

It was only Ike's uneducated guess, but I cannot rule out that possibility either.

"I suppose that's also a possibility..."

"Huh? Don't fuck around." Sudou said.

Sudou, who had been quietly listening to our conversation until now, said those words while glaring at me and Ike.

"Guuu! I-I just said that was a possibility, that's all!" Ike replied to Sudou.

"Oi Ayanokouji, when is Suzune's birthday" Sudou asked

me.

"I don't know." I replied.

"What the hell you're useless" Sudou told me.

But even if he says that, there's no way I would know when Horikita's birthday is.

"If you think about it logically, I don't think anyone in this school knows when Horikita's birthday is."

The only one who would likely know would have to be the student council president who also happens to be her older brother.

"I see. I suppose that's also true, so even though Ayanokouji and I don't know, he knows huh---"

"I know too. Horikita-san's birthday is on the 15th of February. I don't think that has anything to do with this case." Kushida piped in.

"...as expected of Kushida."

I unexpectedly praised her without thinking.

I never expected she'd even know Horikita's birthday. I thought even Kushida would not be able to find out the personal information of loners like Horikita and Ibuki. Especially when it came to Horikita.

This is something only I and the concerned party know, but apparently Kushida hates Horikita and in turn, Horikita also dislikes Kushida. That's why I never thought they would be

the type to tell each other of their birthdays.

She could have learned from a third party, but it's not like Horikita normally talks to other people as well. That's why I was impressed with Kushida.

"So it's the 15th of February, huh? I've heard something really good." Sudou says while grinning and laughing.

Ike, whose neck was trapped under Sudou's arm, tapped the ground while his face slowly turned pale.

"Oh---sorry, I forgot about you." Sudou tells Ike.

"Zeze, Ken you should be more careful since you have monstrous strength!"

"It's because you were saying some confusing stuff."

"Then do it to Ayanokouji too, why are you only picking on me?!"

"It's because you're the closest."

"You single-celled organism!" Ike shouted back at Sudou.

"Huh?"

When Sudou moved to grab him by the chest again, Ike panicked and quickly took his distance from Sudou.

I'd like him to stop rampaging around in someone else's room. Sooner or later I think there will be a complaint.

"The conversation drifted a bit, but what I wanted to say is different. I wanted to say that there are also other possible

candidates. It could also be for a teacher or for one of the clerks at Keyaki Mall. The people we saw during shopping today were all beauties, right?" I said.

"I-I see. When you put it that way, it seems like that's also possible."

Of course, that is leaving aside whether or not a grown-up would actually attempt to date a 1st year student.

Considering rules and morals, and the massive problem it would entail, I cannot imagine such a couple relationship being established.

I'm sure Katsuragi also understands that. It's just that it's too soon to exclude that as one of the possibilities.

In any case, what we have to be mindful of right now is, to not arbitrarily decide that it must be a senior student.

Basically, it's quite difficult to narrow down the person in question, so I'd like them to quickly understand that it's best to just leave it alone.

"Let's stop beig overly excited by ourselves here and stop trying to find out who's Katsuragi's girlfriend, how about that?"

"Are you fine with that?! Even if that baldie has an older girlfriend who's both tolerant of him and with extremely large breasts?"

Even if he had that sort of ideal girlfriend, I wouldn't feel the need to curse at him.

"If it's someone from Class A, it wouldn't be strange even if they were popular with older girls."

But alas this is Class D. Just having a handsome face or a good personality won't be enough to make us popular...but that's not really right either.

Hirata is not only popular with the 1st year girls but also senior students as well, it seems like. And also, a while ago, it seems Kouenji has been getting some attention from the senior students as well.

In the end, it seems the one thing Ike and the others share with me is our lack of popularity.

"I absolutely don't want him to get ahead of me!" Ike said.

"But even if you say that, there's nothing we can do about it."

"That's not true. Just because it's an opponent that we're likely to lose to, doesn't mean we have no chances of winning either."

Sudou said as he glanced at us while hitting his thighs.

"In basketball, as long as it's for victory, even barely legal plays can be done. No, if it's for the sake of victory, as long as it's needed even outright fouls will be committed. You need to be that serious and obsessed about winning. If him giving a girl a present would bring him closer to her, all we have to do is stop him from doing it." Sudou continued.

He seems rather aggressive. But if this were a crucial game to be won, Sudou's idea is the perfect answer. If it were me, I

would have done the same thing.

But this time, this idea is not coming from a logical point of view but rather being done out of personal jealousy.

It's not something that should be praised. But even so, it's not like the usual Sudou, he seems to be all fired up.

"Speaking of which, your tournament's coming up soon."

It seems Yamauchi noticed that since he said that as he turned to look at Sudou.

"Yeah. It's on Thursday. I still don't know if I'll get to play or not but I'm ready to head out onto the field anytime."

Sudou said as he slammed his right fist into his opened left hand as if to show off his perfect condition.

"Yeah, that's it! I'm going to mess with him."

In response to Sudou's reckless thoughts, Ike seems to have made a decision to interfere.

"Kushida, please say something to him."

"Kanji-kun, it's no good if you interfere with him like that."

"Ehhh, no way...Kikyo-chan, you're also interested to find out who's Katsuragi's girlfriend aren't you?"

"Of course I'm also interested to know who he's giving the present to, but intefering is no good."

In the end, Kushida doused Ike's excitement from his intention to interfere, leaving him discontent.

"And that's that."

Perhaps he's dissatisfied from having his idea to interfere using Kushida be ruined, or from being reminded of the incident with Shinohara, Ike turned to me and said this.

"Then Ayanokouji. You find out their identity. Who exactly is it that Katsuragi is going to hand his present over to."

"That's impossible."

"Even if it's impossible, you must still do it. You're free anyways, right?" Ike told me.

I certainly cannot deny that but...if he's that curious I'd like him to investigate it himself.

"Finding out is fine and all but, I'm not in the same class as him and we're not even friends you know." I told him.

It's going to be painful to research the contact number, the room number and names of people I don't even know.

"If it's Katsuragi-kun's contact number then I know. Do you want me to tell you?" Kushida asked me.

"....."

That's right...the one beside me right now is someone who even knows Horikita's birthday, the beautiful girl with the largest social network in the school.

It certainly wouldn't be strange even if she were to know Katsuragi's contact number.

"How do you know his contact number?"

"A while ago during the test we were in the same group. I asked him for it then."

I see. To be able to exchange contact numbers even in a situation like that is something amazing.

"So, I'll tell you then."

"No. That's fine. If I just suddenly happened to contact him, Katsuragi would also be surprised."

He might even ignore an incoming call from a number he doesn't recognize.

"You stopped me from interfering with him so take responsibility." Ike told me.

"Even if you tell me to take responsibility..."

"I'm also curious so make sure to investigate it" Sudou gives me an order with a bullish attitude.

"Don't you think you should investigate it yourselves?" I asked.

"Huh? I'm not free until the tournament on Thursday. I only have a few more days to practice you know?" Sudou replies to me.

He's using his club activities as an excuse to force this onto me.

When I remained silent without answering him, Sudou starts to glare at me.

"Do you want me to make you listen to me with force?"

Sudou asks me as he starts swinging his arms around. Depending on the situation, he may put me in a headlock.

In this group, the one with the lowest communication ability, which is me, would be unable to escape if he decides to make an example out of me.

"...I got it. I'll try looking into it tomorrow. Just don't expect too much. I don't know how it's going to turn out." I told him.

Let's get this over with for now. I can just tell them later I tried to investigate it and couldn't find out anything and that'll be the end of that.

* * *

"It's hot...it's so hot I could die from this...."

The next day, in order to scout out Katsuragi's outings, I found myself on a street lined with trees.

This is the street that branches off to the dormitories of each grade and as such in order to meet with a senior student, one would inevitably need to pass through here.

In addition, this street also leads to Keyaki Mall where there are a multitude of shops as well as leading to the school itself. Therefore, wherever Katsuragi decides to go, I will not miss him.

Normally I would wait in the lobby where it's cool, however unfortunately a group of girls from another class who I do not know have decided to have a tea party there and that option was suppressed.

There was a shop I could have entered but it seems there aren't any seats left available, leaving him hesitant to actually enter, something like that.

And my heart wasn't brave enough to slip into whatever free space I could find and relax there either.

Occasionally, male and female students in their casual wear pass by peacefully, heading out to play for the day.

Naturally all the students would be in their casual wear. Which was why I thought back to the Katsuragi who was wearing his uniform yesterday and asked myself a question.

There is no rule stating that one cannot wear their uniform over the summer vacation. However, since the uniform itself stores heat and quickly heats up as such, even if one does not care much about being fashionable, it still wouldn't be convincing enough for them to go out wearing their uniform.

But if he treats his uniform as his summer wear also that would be slightly more convincing. And instead of summer wear, Katsuragi was dressed sharply complete with long sleeves.

It was something I had noticed recently, but there seems to be many variations of our uniform. Of course, the me who is constantly short on points was unaware of this, but it seems summer wear clothes are being sold at a rather expensive price as I had recently learned.

The girls in our class, despite wanting those clothes someday, are currently forced into a state where they have to bear with it. It's part of the theory that one wears their casual wear when going out, but a reason to dare to wear one's

uniform.....

As I thought of such a thing, my mind immediately goes to a similar type of person. The Katsuragi from yesterday, and not just him, it seems there are quite a few people who prefer their uniforms.

And from the dormitory where senior students live, a male and a female student walk out. When they noticed me, they diverted from their path and approached me.

"It's been a while."

"I was wondering who would wear their uniform in this shitty hot weather, so it's Horikita's brother huh..." I replied.

Unlike Katsuragi, they were wearing a summer variation of the uniform, however seeing them wear their uniforms on a holiday made me recall feelings of incompatibility.

"Uwa, President, this boy has a 'I just met with someone troublesome' face about him."

Although I had only made such an easy-to-understand expression, the girl standing beside the elder Horikita, the 3rd year secretary Tachibana, said that in an exaggerated tone.

But even so, unlike the male uniforms, the uniform that the girls wear don't seem to give off the feeling of being hot.

If I could feel such coolness, I wouldn't be making complaints like that though.

"Even though it's the summer vacation, it seems the

student council is rather busy." I asked them.

Secretary Tachibana seems to be holding something resembling a notebook. I almost thought for a moment that the second semester had already begun.

"We were simply using the summer vacation to renovate the student council room and that is the extent of this relationship."

Secretary Tachibana explains that to me without even the need to bother the president.

"I see, see you then" I told her.

"Uwaaa, for someone that just heard something like that your reaction is awfully carefree. More importantly you, you should watch your mouth a little bit more too. Do you even know who this person is? This is the fearsome student council president of this school, you know." Tachibana told me.

I know that. I also know that he wields an unbelievable amount of influence too.

At first I did think to show respect and deference towards him, and even speak formally, but I had stopped thinking that along the way.

The elder Horikita too, does not seem to wish for me to speak formally and so I chose to not hold back.

But even so, Secretary Tachibana too seemed to be different from how I had initially imagined her. I had thought her to be a more serious person than this, but it seems she's quite a lenient person as well.

"Do you wish to impose a penalty on me befitting this school? Sorry but I'm completely out of points."

I told her as if to shrug off her words.

The elder Horikita too, I had thought, wouldn't want anything to do with a person like me but rather than leaving he narrowed his eyes and said this to me.

"Ayanokouji, if you are currently free, I want you to accompany me for a while."

"P-President?"

It seems Secretary Tachibana is surprised at the president who had just invited me. I was surprised too. But---

"Sorry but my schedule's already full." I told him.

"Ehh? You're declining?"

And now Secretary Tachibana seems to be overwhelmed by my rejection of the student council president's invitation.

"Then when are you free. I don't mind changing my schedule for you. I don't mind even if it's after school resumes." he tells me.

It seems the elder Horikita is showing no signs of giving up.

It usually doesn't do much good to postpone the problem I guess. And besides, if we do this at a later date there's the possibility that I would end up wasting more time. If that's the case, it would be more convenient to do this now.

"Then let's hear it now. I still have some time until my next

task" I told him.

"But you said your schedule was full just now?"

I deflected all of Secretary Tachibana's interjections as she said them.

"Where were you planning on going from here? I don't mind changing my schedule to accomodate you."

"Ahh---I'm waiting for someone. If we can help it, I don't want to move from here." I replied to him.

"But it's hot here, you know? It's not a suitable place for a meeting."

"I'm well aware."

Even though it's hot here, I thought myself an upstanding person for honorably carrying out this punishment game scenario. It was self-praise.

"I suppose sometimes talking while standing isn't so bad either. If you feel uncomfortable here, I don't mind if you return to the dormitory ahead of me."

"No. My antenna is telling me I cannot leave president alone with this boy here." Tachibana replied to him.

And after saluting the student council president like that, Secretary Tachibana stuck to him almost like a bodyguard.

"Reports have come in to the student council. The uninhabited island test and the special examination on the ship. Were they hard?" he asks me.

"The student council really has a lot of influence, huh? To think they'd even be privy to those reports."

"Even though I say reports, we don't know all the details. Individual actions and the degree thereof are unknown to us."

"I'm glad about that."

"Aren't you glad? That the president doesn't know about your failings." Tachibana said to me.

It seems Secretary Tachibana never misses a chance to spit venom at me. It seems, at some point, she's marked me as her enemy.

I suppose it was inevitable given I was casually talking back to the president.

"But information is something that always ends up leaking. The fact that you outsmarted the other classes during the uninhabited island test, and the fact that you held the "target" on the cruise ship when you were assigned to the (Rabbit) group is something that is known to us." he told me.

Despite saying it's unknown, it seems a lot of it has been leaked. This is going to make me doubt their integrity.

"In addition, the name of Horikita Suzune came up after the uninhabited island test. That she became the center of her class and outsmarted the other classes. But in regards to that, I think the one truly responsible for that is you."

He tells me and it seems the older Horikita has an absolute confidence in that. I softly murmured that to myself.

"You're completely overestimating me though?"

"The name of the leader ultimately changed to you. How would you explain that?"

"...you even know about something like that, huh?"

"The only ones who know of this fact are me and the Special Examinations Committee only. And now Secretary Tachibana has overheard us. This is something not even the homeroom teachers know of, so relax" he said.

This isn't a situation where I can just relax.

Just how much influence does this man have? Normally, student councils are just decorations without any real power. For them to surpass even the teachers, what exactly is this?

"What exactly is this student council?" I asked him.

"The student council by itself has no power. It's up to the talent of the person leading it."

"That's again an impressive statement. I did hear about it earlier, but you're really Class A aren't you?"

I never really needed to confirm it, but since I'm already here I asked him again.

"Isn't that obvious? It's natural!!!" Tachibana replied.

"But in that case I still don't understand something. How large is the difference between me and Horikita? Actually, if you only look at our data, Horikita is far superior to me. I don't understand the reason you're bothering yourself with a

D like me." I told him.

"You're misunderstanding one thing. I don't think the people of Class D are stupid. It's not like this school is sorting out exceptional people in order starting from Class A or anything like that."

"Umm president...I think you're saying too many unnecessary things, I think you may have said too much?"

"There's no problem. This man naturally understands that already."

Just how far is he intending to go in overpraising me?

Ever since our strange first meeting, this student council president-sama seems to be focusing on me to a troublesome extent.

"Then why did you reject Horikita? Isn't it because she's of Class D?" I asked him.

"Regardless of the environment, as long as she's my sister I understand everything about her capability. She's a failure who was placed in Class D because she deserved it. There's nothing more and nothing less than that." he replied.

This man sure views his sister very harshly.

"All of it was planned by Horikita. Your sister doesn't have any friends besides me you see, so I was only given the necessary role." I told him.

"That's wrong. This is not an idea she would think of."

Perhaps it's because they spent a long time together as siblings, it seems he has a complete grasp on her way of thinking. But even so, I have reached a point of understanding.

One of the reasons this man has set his eyes on me is most likely the same reason as Chabashira-sensei.

If he's noticed my playful 50% test scores on the entrance examination, it wouldn't be strange if he has also noticed the difference between my student report and my resume.

"Please stop fishing for my personal information like a stalker. I want to lead a quiet school life."

I appealed to him like that but after he touched his glasses once he again said this crazy statement.

"I did offer you this a while ago but, won't you join the student council?" he asks me.

Secretary Tachibana then panics with fluttering wide eyes.

An extremely surprising statement had just been made.

"That's quite a laidback student council you have there. Have the seats not yet been filled?" I asked.

"P-President? Just a few days ago, the student council accepted a 1st year girl already, hasn't it? Isn't that the end of it? We also took in some 2nd years and all the seats should already be filled."

And that's apparently that. I said that to that man with eye contact but he proceeded to say something unprecedented.

"There is still one empty seat left." he said.

"One...it can't be!?"

"Ayanokouji. If you wish, I will use my influence to make you vice president." he told me.

"W-wait."

Secretary Tachibana seems to be back to her energetic self. I thought she was an interesting person from watching her.

"This is unprecedented! It's a 1st year and also from Class D. It can't be that this rude boy can suddenly become vice president!"

"I've said this many times over but I refuse." I told him.

"And in addition to that, I refuse without any more questions asked." I added.

But even so, this is strange. He doesn't seem to be saying this in jest, but the evaluation and the way he seems to be treating me is not normal.

Indeed, to a certain extent, the elder Horikita has access to information.

Compared to Ike and Yamauchi (no offense to them), I can understand why he would choose me.

But if we go by potential alone, starting with Katsuragi and Ichinose, including Hirata and even Kouenji. There should be plenty of students like that that exist.

There should be no reason he would go to such lengths to

elect me. That means there is a reason why it has to be me, in other words.

"It may not be for me to say as the student council president. But starting from next year, this school will undergo a massive change. And it's not going to be a desirable change at that. And when that time comes, in order to protect the rules of this school, I need to create a force capable of countering it from this current stage. It might already be too late though. I feel the necessity for that growing stronger every day." he told me.

"President, you're talking about that in the scenario where Nagumo-kun becomes the student council president, right? I don't quite believe he would end up making a bad school..."

I've never heard of the name Nagumo from amongst the 1st years. Changing starting from next year would mean he is from among the 2nd years.

"Normally, there can be up to two vice presidents at a time in the student council. Starting next year it seems it'll be just one, but if you change your mind, it's still not an impossible thing to do." he tells me.

"No, no, no President. Surely that's impossible...there's no way Nagumo-kun would give his permission for something like that."

"I don't know anything about vice presidents or any Nagumos but I won't do it. You're going to graduate and leave this school, that's all right? There's no need for you to worry about the students left behind. Or is it---"

I slightly paused so that it would lend more weight to my

next words.

"If it's because you're worried about your sister and want my help, then there might be room for you to consult me on the matter." I told him.

"...I see."

If I say that, then this man too, will not be able to depend on me too much.

As a matter of fact, he seems to have given up completely, since after that he stopped touching on the subject of the student council.

"Sorry for taking up your time. That's all the business I have with you. But feel free to drop by the student council any time, I'd be happy to treat you to tea." he told me.

So even this man who's built up a firm foundation for this school has his own anxieties, huh?

While feeling such an unexpected thing, I decided to return---but I can't go back. It was the perfect timing to go back though. It's too bad I have to wait for Katsuragi.

* * *

The situation started turning for the better roughly 30 minutes after my conversation with the older Horikita.

Wearing the exact same outfit as yesterday, Katsuragi was slowly heading in my direction.

While I observed him from a slight distance away out of his

path, I saw him holding in his hands what seems like the bag containing what he bought from that shop yesterday.

"What does it mean?"

There's still time left until the 29th. Normally one would keep something like that in their room until then. But the fact that he is carrying it around now, perhaps he means to hand it over now?

Even so, I'm curious about his uniform-wearing appearance. Perhaps he intends to act in his formal wear, but honestly I'd rather not see him handing over the present in this heat wearing that outfit.

I held my breath as I attempt to confirm where Katsuragi is headed. And when I did, we soon came to a crossroads.

Katsuragi did not proceed down the road that leads to the dormitories of the senior students. He instead proceeded down a road that was outside of my expectations surprisingly.

What lies at the end of that road was the school amidst a summer vacation. I shadow him without alerting him.

"So that's why he was wearing his uniform---".

It wasn't because he liked wearing it but rather because he intended to enter the school. I finally understand.

Katsuragi then entered the school from the main entrance. But since it's come to this, I can't follow Katsuragi just like that. As long as it is forbidden to enter the school building in casual wear, I cannot enter.

"Did you meet Katsuragi?!"

As my phone vibrated, my screen seems to be projecting a chat that seems to have been sent to my from the room.

Then, without reading the message, I closed my phone and decided to change the direction of my attack.

I headed towards the shop where we selected our presents yesterday at Keyaki Mall. And once there, I randomly entered a shop that seems to be popular with girls. I was curious what kind of presents would be sold in other shops.

It's just, even when compared to other shops, I could not tell what the difference was.

In the end, I ended up returning to the shop from yesterday where Katsuragi bought his birthday present. I eventually reached the place where chocolates put in small, thin boxes were stacked.

I did take into consideration the possibility that it might not just be a seniors student but a man he's giving the present to, but looking at it again, that possibility isn't very high. The chocolates were decorated with hearts and other decorations that girls would like.

"Kyahaha, I know right?"

Some girls, who had started being loud inside the shop, passed behind me. At that moment, I received a slight bump to my back.

"Woah."

The products that I bumped into with my elbow shook lightly, and the pile of stacked chocolate collapsed like an avalanche.

The girls who were engulfed in their conversation, without even noticing the tragedy that had occurred here, simply left the shop while still talking.

"Geez."

I do know that I don't have much of a presence, but I'd like them to at least notice me a little.

"What are you doing?"

As I was attempting to restack the fallen products desperately, a giant man called out to me from behind.

It was Katsuragi who should have gone to the school. He looks down at me with a perplexed face.

"I'm here to...buy a birthday present."

Having unexpectedly run into him, it was all I could do to answer.

After glancing at the scattered gift boxes, he bends down with his large body to pick them up.

"Ahh. No. I can pick them up myself."

"Don't mind it. It would be bad to let other customers see this. It's better to clean it up quickly. Two is better than one in that case."

Having said that, and without even a sign of disliking it, he

went on to lend me a hand.

It's been around 30 minutes that I had spent visiting other shops, I wonder if he finished up his business at the school during that time.

But in Katsuragi's hands, he was holding a bag of products from this shop. I sneaked a peek into it and when I did, it seemed to contain a small box packaged as a gift. It seems he hasn't given it yet.

"This should be fine."

When the two of us did it together, we cleaned up the shop in no time. Fortunately, neither the clerk nor any customers happened to see this.

"Thanks."

I think Katsuragi is basically a good person.

During the time on the uninhabited island too, Katsuragi showed strange goodwill towards us such as when he kept watch over the corn we found.

Naturally, he won't show any mercy if it comes to a competition between classes, but it seems his personality itself isn't that of a bad person.

"Are you buying a present for your girlfriend?" Katsuragi asks me.

"Ehh? No, it's not like that. She's just a classmate. I think I'll just buy it next time."

It's not like I ever intended to buy it in the first place, but I said that as I took my distance from that corner.

And as if to match my actions, Katsuragi also took his distance, so I decided to chat him up a little to see if I could extract some information from him.

"Are you also buying a birthday present?" I asked him.

"Hmm? Why did you think that?"

"You're holding a bag from this shop in your hands, I was in the same corner too."

"I see. Indeed it is true, I suppose I shouldn't have even needed to think that." he replies to me.

Perhaps he's convinced, but Katsuragi nods and meets my gaze.

"I was in a bit of trouble since I couldn't find the item I wanted, what did you buy?"

"It's no big deal. I just bought one of the chocolates you pushed down just now. I think this shop's set of items isn't bad at all, but I suppose it's up to each individual person to have their own preferences. I would do well to look around in other shops too." Katsuragi answers me.

Then, without telling me who he is giving it too and without me hearing any names, the two of us left the shop.

"Why are you wearing your uniform?"

Naturally I'm not going to be mentioning yesterday, but for

two consecutive days Katsuragi's been coming here wearing his uniform. It would be the obvious thing to do to ask him about it.

"It's necessary to wear a uniform if you wish to enter the school building after all. That's why it couldn't be helped." he tells me.

"That means you went to school?"

Of course, since I was tailing him, I already know he had gone to school earlier.

Now all that's left is to ask him 'who' he's giving it to. In his hands, Katsuragi's still gripping the bag.

I had thought it would be possible to obtain some information from him, but unfortunately it doesn't seem like it's going to be the case.

"Ahh. There are also various things I wanted to hand over."

He did not talk deeply on the matter, but it seems Katsuragi has something on his mind since he glanced in the direction of the school.

"Have you ever thought about this? The disadvantages in going to this school?"

"Disadvantages?"

"That's right. It doesn't have anything to do with classes, but all students equally share in it."

I had to put some effort into the mysterious question I was

asked. If this has something to do with the difference in classes, then problems will arise on a case-by-case basis.

There are cases like Class D that's beset by a point shortage, but it's hard to imagine Class A would have such troubles. But from the statement that this applies equally to all students, such things can be excluded.

If so, exactly what is it? Although I was seriously attempting to find the answer, I could not reach a conclusion.

"You don't know? Of course it varies from person to person but 'You cannot contact the outside." is the disadvantage' Katsuragi tells me.

"Ahh. I see."

But since that for me was not a disadvantage, but rather an advantage, I did not consider it at all. Of course, if you look at it normally, it might be considered a disadvantage.

"Don't you want to contact your parents or your siblings?" Katsuragi asks me.

"I wonder. But leaving me aside, I think quite a lot of students would say the same thing."

In particular, girls would often complain that they're lonely.

However, in regards to information leakage to the outside, this school strictly prohibits all forms of contact. If one carelessly breaks this rule, it won't end with just a warning.

"But the benefits you receive in return are massive and I

don't think this is reason enough to be dissatisfied?"

"Indeed that is true. Both the point system and completeness of the facilities are something ordinary students can not enjoy and is certainly an advantage."

Furthermore, he also gets the benefit of having graduated from Class A.

Wait, why the hell am I conversing naturally with Katsuragi? In addition, during the summer vacation.

"You're a student who's close with Horikita, aren't you?"

"Is a false rumor like that spreading around?" I asked him.

"False rumor? I distinctly remember you acting together with her when you met me."

"It's something like a connection of fate that happens commonly, or more like from the flow that started when we were assigned seats next to each other, we just happened to talk to each other from there is all."

As long as it's talk pertaining to the school, it's nothing unusual at all, I think. It seems Katsuragi's also got such an image since he nods.

"So that's how it is. It seems surprisingly I don't know a lot about the other classes despite thinking I did. If I made you feel uncomfortable, please forgive me. I don't have any ulterior motives in this." Katsuragi tells me.

"It's something I hear often recently so it's fine. It seems Horikita's doing a great job."

"That's right."

Katsuragi briefly agreed with me, but he isn't showing any signs of continuing.

"To tell you the truth, this is the third time I've come to this shop. I'm the type to constantly think about something I'm worrying about, you see. Even though it's just a present, when I think about the feelings of the one receiving it, I cannot just decide simply."

Someone he worries over giving a present to, I wonder just who it is. Should I try to dig into it a little?

"It might be strange to say something like this, but you're an upstanding person. To buy someone a birthday present like this."

"Do you think it's strange to celebrate the day of one's birth?" Katsuragi asks me.

At the very least seeing a giant skinhead do it gives me a feeling of incompatibility. But that's just a prejudiced view.

In this world there are even delinquents born that would save a cat in the middle of the pouring rain.

"I'll be honest, who are you going to give it to?"

I cut to the chase.I won't get far even if I beat around the bush.

"To who, huh?"

Perhaps that question confounded even the person in

question, since he showed some hesitation.

"It's something personal. It's not something for you to hear about." he tells me.

I think it's something that can't be helped but he ended up evading the question. If he answers like that, I would no longer be in a position to inquire further. If it's a best friend it would be a different matter though.

"Excuse me."

And without leaving a single word behind, Katsuragi left towards the dormitory.

I did manage to solve the problem of why he was wearing a uniform, but further mysteries only arose from that.

Why did he go to the school? Why did he show up at the shop again? I could not clearly see the answers to those.

* * *

"Oi, Ike. I investigated the Katsuragi case."

"Seriously? You're pretty good, Ayanokouji. I'm seeing you in a new light now."

Saying that, Ike praised me while putting a hand on my shoulder. Was I even doing something that deserved being seen in a new light?

Feeling a little doubt about how low Ike had evaluated me internally, I reported the situation to him.

"Unfortunately, I couldn't find out who from where he was

giving it to."

That's not quite true.

To be more specific, I couldn't find out the profile of any girl he could possibly be giving it to. No matter how much I investigated, I couldn't quite figure it out.

In the same school year, there is no one with that birthday date. However, I couldn't think of any student in the other school years as well.

In this case, wouldn't the person we're thinking of in a completely different location? Looking shocked, Yamauchi raised his head.

"This is bad...I knew this would happen. Just who is Katsuragi going to give his present to?"

Rather than joy or excitement, Yamauchi instead made a sorrowful expression as he starts talking as if he's understood something.

"Hey, Kanji. Didn't you think Valentine's was hell back in middle school?"

"W-w-what are you saying all of a sudden? Sure, it was tough for me. But what about it?"

"Basically isn't this a sort of extension of that...that guy, I think he could have bought it for himself."

"Surely no---n-no it could be possible. That baldie doesn't seem like he'd be popular..."

The two of them seemed to be convinced after that brief, hard-to-understand exchange.

But still, it was a development that I had never expected and so I decided to ask a question.

"Are you saying he bought himself a present for his birthday?"

"What else could it be, Ayanokouji."

They glared at me as if they were angry.

Leaving that aside, normally one won't buy themselves their own presents, would they?

Of course I did consider that he may have been rewarding himself with it to a degree. Like eating something delicious, or buying something he wants. But in this case, I don't think that's applicable.

He went out of his way to get a package a girl would like, complete with the wrappings and the chocolate inside. If he simply has that much of a sweet tooth, it would have suited him better to buy it in a different form.

"You seriously don't get it?".

"...unfortunately." I replied.

"No matter how you look at it, Katsuragi doesn't seem like the type to be popular with girls, right? But still, he is the leader of Class A."

I'm going to withhold making any comments on that

statement.

"That means he must be rather prideful. He would definitely want to make others around him think he's popular. In other words, it's an act."

"It means instead of saying it's something he bought for himself, he's going to play it off as if someone had given it to him, that's what it means."

They must have felt there was nothing wrong with the conclusion they reached, since both Ike and Yamauchi nodded in agreement.

"I also did the same back in middle school too, I made it look like I got it from the cutest girl in the school."

"Hearing it like that doesn't it sort of feel, hollow?"

"Isn't it obvious? Of course it feels hollow, but it's better than the crushing despair of not getting any."

He got angry.

It seems for Ike, events like Valentine's and birthdays truly are huge events.

"By the way Haruki, you were also in the same boat weren't you?"

"Huh? No, I'm different. I was popular with the girls, you know?" Yamauchi replied to Ike.

"You liar. Then why did you say something like that? Wasn't it because you thought he was doing the same thing as

you?"

"I'm telling you that's not true. In middle school, there was an unpopular guy like Kanji that I knew, that's all." Yamauchi said.

It was obviously a bluff, but I had neither the means nor the intention to find out the truth.

"But that's just a guess, right?"

"No there's no doubt about it. That absolutely has to be the case!"

It seems they've decided there's no further room to doubt the conclusion they've reached, since they did not argue with each other any further.

"Hey Haruki, maybe we've misunderstood baldie...Katsuragi?"

"Yeah. I was treating him with hostility because he was Class A, but now all of a sudden he seems closer to us."

"That means, you were also an unpopular guy who bought presents for himself after all."

"No. It just reminded me of my classmate and I felt sorry for him that's all." Yamauchi replied to Ike.

Yamauchi stubborn denies Ike's statements.

"Do you want to cooperate for a moment?"

All of a sudden, something like that was said.

"What do you mean by cooperate?"

"We're going to prepare a birthday present for him."

From a state of antagonism towards Katsuragi, it seems Ike has instead changed to a state of sympathy.

"Sure, I understand it's best getting one from a girl. But that's impossible. And in that case, wouldn't it be a blessing to receive a birthday present from someone else?"

I felt something was off with that logic, but I would be hard-pressed to deny it all.

Rather than buying a present for yourself for a lie, one would want to receive a present from someone else. It's just, the thing to be careful of is sympathy can surprisingly be a troublesome thing.

If Katsuragi did indeed buy the present for himself, would he even be ok with Ike and the others, who are in the know, celebrating it? On the other hand, he may instead get angry and reject their sympathy.

Ike and Yamauchi have already begun discussing what to buy for him, but once again I felt doubt regarding that conclusion.

Indeed there are no girls whose birthday is tomorrow. But it's not like all other possibilities have been cut out.

The teachers of this school and other authorities, including the other employees on school grounds. If we broaden the definition of 'girl' there are still a lot of candidates left.

And besides if it's really a present for himself, would he just boldly buy it just like that? And on top of that, Katsuragi's outfit was the unusual uniform in the middle of summer vacation.

It couldn't have done anything but make him stand out. It's easy to imagine people would be suspicious if they saw him, and normally one wouldn't act in uniform.

"Ayanokouji, you fork over some points too. If the three of us each have around 1500 points we could buy something nice for him."

I've already heard this kind of talk yesterday though.....

In other words, my expenditure would double. The expenditure of 1000 points is not a small thing.

"So Ayanokouji, this may be a little fast but tomorrow let's celebrate Katsuragi's birthday."

Has their switch already been turned, it seems the two of them are intent on buying Katsuragi a present.

"Are you really going to buy one?"

"Isn't it obvious we're going to buy? Don't you also think of saving an unpopular, lone man?"

Ahh, this is becoming more and more troublesome so I chose not to refuse them. Having decided to meet up tomorrow, the conversation ended and we disbanded for the day.

* * *

As we gathered again the next day in the afternoon, the form of Kushida was also there.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Oh, hello."

Why is she here? Such questions were answered with the next words coming from Ike.

"No you see, yesterday I consulted Kikyo-chan. When I told her I wanted to buy a present for Katsuragi, she insisted on cooperating with us. And so she asked to join. Hey, Katsuragi would be happier too if instead of boys, a girl also celebrated his birthday." Ike told me.

He went on and on praising her, but I think he just simply wanted to create an opportunity where he could be together with Kushida.

And on top of that, it would make her see Ike as someone who cares about his friends too.

"I'm also in Katsuragi-kun's debt so naturally please let me share in the costs for the present."

Kushida said. And in response to that gentle consideration, Ike stared at Kushida with lovestruck eyes.

Yamauchi too, despite him gunning for Sakura, seems to be strongly affected by Kushida's charm as he seems to be having more fun than he did when it was only boys here.

"By the way, Ayanokouji-kun, why are you wearing your uniform?"

"It's just like that."

I did take off my jacket earlier since it was overwhelmingly hot, but as expected the uniform makes me stand out in a bad way too.

"Let's hurry up and go!"

Flanking Kushida's sides, the two of them walked out leaving me behind.

And almost immediately after, a conversation started to bloom. I'm always impressed whenever I see someone capable of striking up a conversation with anyone at any time.

I walk slightly behind the three of them. On the way, I spotted someone unusual outside.

"Sorry, can you go on ahead? I've got something to do." I told them.

"Fine but make sure not to keep Kikyo-chan waiting."

"Yeah."

I excused myself and I approached that certain person.

"You're pretty carefree. The four of you going out shopping? Even though we suffered that much at the hands of Ryuuen-kun."

"Well, that just means Class C did something well. No point in worrying about it now. Right?"

"You're right...but, there are still a lot of things I'm not convinced of."

"Such as?"

"...nothing."

Then, with an expression like that of Sawajiri Erika, she turned her head and didn't seem to have any sign of answering me.

"When are we right now?"

"Ehh?"

"I'm asking when we are right now, our school year. The month too."

"What are you talking about?"

"Look here, we've just finished the first semester of our first year. There's no need to rush. Just because they've extended their lead by a little doesn't mean there's a need to despair."

"But even so, that was a crushing defeat. If we don't think of a way....."

"Even though you can't see what's directly beneath you, you always look ahead. The student known as Horikita Suzune excels at academics, but when it comes to unique fights like this, you can't do anything at all. That's the current impression of you I have." I told Horikita.

"...I get that already."

"I see, so you were aware of it. In any case, I think it's better for you to fall until you hit the bottom." I told her.

"What do you mean?"

Right now it's fine for you to be thoroughly crushed, as long as you crawl back up in the end. I think Horikita has the potential to do that.

"There is an order to things. Right now you should take

things slowly without rushing, isn't that fine?"

"You say there's an order to things, but then why did you act on the uninhabited island? There's a contradiction there." Horikita replies to me.

"Perhaps."

It can't be helped if Horikita, who does not know about my interactions with Chabashira-sensei, thinks of this as something mysterious.

During the uninhabited island test, I was forced to 'show my ability' so I had no choice but to act.

Of course, the cruise ship exam, in which I did not have many pawns to act through, proved to be difficult for me, but there were still several methods available to me.

But the reason I did not use those methods despite that was, if I messed up too much, nothing good could come of it.

I am fundamentally disinterested in things like Class A or Class B. Therefore, without stirring up things too much, but still showing my abilities a little to Chabashira-sensei, I can buy time that way.

That's why looking at it from my perspective, even that earlier examination was a huge success.

"More importantly, don't you have any questions to ask about my appearance?" I asked her.

"I do think you're wearing awfully hot clothes, but I don't have any other impression of it."

As usual, she's not interested in other people.

"What are you reading today?"

"It doesn't matter to you, right?"

Saying that, she didn't show any signs of letting me see the book's title.

"Well, that's fine too. I'm making Ike and the others wait so I'll be leaving now. Do you want to come too?" I asked her.

"You must be joking. I will refuse." Horikita replied.

Having expected her to answer me like that, I decided to leave without hesitation.

* * *

"What are you guys doing...?"

Suddenly surrounded by Ike and the others with who he had no connections, even the normally calm Katsuragi could not hide his surprise.

It was there that Kushida, who must have participated in the dialogue of the earlier exam, started talking to him.

"Sorry for being so sudden, Katsuragi-kun, do you have some time?"

"Kushida, huh? What is the meaning of this?" Katsuragi asks.

"The truth is, I heard it from Ike-kun and the others. But isn't today supposed to be Katsuragi-kun's birthday?"

"Muu...that's right but...you've figured it out pretty well."

Perhaps he had no recollection of telling this fact to anyone, but he looks at us with a slightly confused expression.

"So that's why the four of us here wanted to celebrate it with Katsuragi-kun and that's why we called out to you." Kushida continued.

"No. There's no reason to do anything that special. Am I wrong?" Katsuragi replies.

It seems rather than rejoicing at this, he's put his guard up.

That was inevitable. It wouldn't be strange even if he thought it were some trap from Class D.

But even so, the fact that he isn't showing signs of immediately rejecting us, is probably largely thanks to Kushida's presence.

"Do you have any plans to meet someone else today?" Kushida asks.

"That's not the case but....."

Kushida then claps her hands with a big smile as if to say 'I'm glad'.

If she shows that kind of smile, any ordinary man would fall in love with her with that one shot. But this man is the leader of Class A, and is not someone that can simply be sunk like this.

"I'm sorry but it's not like we're close friends or anything. If

there's any ulterior motives to this please say so." Katsuragi said.

"There are no ulterior motives. We're seriously just thinking about celebrating your birthday, Katsuragi." Ike said that with a serious face.

He's probably thinking about celebrating Katsuragi's birthday from the bottom of his heart filled with sympathy.

"Mu....."

This is a bind, as if to say that Katsuragi tightened his mouth with an expression of rejection.

And so I realized that in his hands, Katsuragi was holding the same birthday present bag as yesterday. It was something he should have bought two days ago, and yet he was carrying it around with him wherever he went. I wonder why.

It seems Ike and the others have not realized this (or have realized and are pretending to not have) and they called out to Katsuragi.

"Sorry but I have business at the school now. I apologize." Katsuragi said.

"School, eh? Speaking of which, recently you've been always wearing your uniform. What are you doing?"

Ike asked in a casual manner but Katsuragi did not miss the incongruousness in that one word.

"What do you mean by that?"

From the mild-mannered look he had just a while ago, it seems Katsuragi has entered his battle mode as his expression turned sharp.

"Ehh? What is what?"

Ike remained aloof without having realized that change but that aloofness collapsed with the next lines that followed.

"How did you know that I was wearing my uniform recently?" he asked.

Being stared by strong eyes that seemed to suck you in, Ike unexpectedly gulped.

He must have picked up the words that were whispered in his subconscious and remembered something inconvenient.

"Ehh? No, that's..."

"Yesterday after you met me, I met up with Ike and the others. I told them about it then, should I have not?"

Having been left with no other choice but to follow up like that, I told that to Katsuragi.

"I thought it was unusual clothing for summer vacation." I continued.

"I see...thinking about it I suppose that's true."

"Yeah that's right. That, that." Ike said.

"So why're you going to school?"

The panicking appearance of Ike was still suspicious, but

for now I've succeeded in changing the topic of the conversation.

"It's personal. Nothing to do with you guys." Katsuragi replies.

"This may be unnecessary. But isn't there something troubling you?"

"Why do you think so?"

"Both yesterday and today, you were carrying around that bag, right? It's a bit unnatural for you to go to school with that too. And you already had that bag in your hands when we met at the shop yesterday. It's been at least three times, hasn't it?" I asked him.

There's the fact that I did see it by coicidence, but it's not that hard to infer that from what I said.

"I have some business at the student council. That's all." Katsuragi tells me.

Again, the name of an unexpected place appeared.

"Could it be the reason you were wearing your uniform yesterday was because you went to the student council room?"

"...that's right. But it seems they were out."

"If I recall, up until yesterday they were renovating the room and it was unusuable."

Katsuragi made a slightly surprised face and proceeded to

ask me how I knew that.

"I happen to have some ties with the student council president."

"So you were acquaintances with that student council president?"

"I wonder if you could call him my acquaintance but...it's something like that anyways." I replied.

"Ahh, I see. Horikita of Class D is the student council president's little sister huh?"

The smart Katsuragi quickly reached that conclusion on his own and was convinced.

"If that's the case, it would be a lot better if you accompanied me. If time allows, would you please accompany me?"

Katsuragi requested as such from me.

And with this, I can more or less understand what Katsuragi is aiming at.

"That's a coincidence. I also have some business with the student council right now."

"So that's why you're also wearing your uniform?"

Of course, that was only so I could figure out Katsuragi's aim but with this I'll be able to get to the bottom of this.

Nodding once, Katsuragi began heading towards the school, towards the student council room.

* * *

"Excuse me."

Katsuragi, with a clear voice, said that as he knocked on the door to the student council room.

Student council president Horikita Manabu and Secretary Tachibana came out to welcome us. The older Horikita immediately noticed my presence.

"It seems the unexpected but welcome visitors came together."

I lightly bowed to return the greeting.

Secretary Tachibana, on the other hand, had an extremely disgusted expression on her face.

"Today I came here because I have a request to make. Basically, I heard that student requests go through the student council and that is why I've come."

"It seems you came by both yesterday and the day before yesterday. We were absent due to the renovations. I apologize."

"No. It is currently the summer vacation. The fault lies with the side pushing the matter. But I am glad I was able to meet you today. Depending on the situation, I had been thinking to go directly to your dormitory." Katsuragi said.

In the middle of the summer vacation, why did Katsuragi decide to stop by this place. And what exactly are his intentions in being here. That is finally being revealed.

"In this school, during the period of enrollment, we are forbidden to contact the outside without express permission. I would like to inquire further into that and so I have come here."

"From the sound of it, you've naturally been looking through the school regulations? Extreme, unavoidable reasons as the exception, contact is strictly forbidden."

Exactly as the older Horikita said, only in unavoidable circumstances is this permitted. Severe illness or injuries are the only times when permission is granted.

"Yes. But in regards to individual cases, how would I be best advised to deal with it. I would like to deliver a package and a message card to my family outside the school grounds. Of course, I'm not expecting to hear a reply from my family." Katsuragi said.

In other words, a unilateral communication.

"It's the same thing. Even if this is unilateral, it still is forbidden."

Those words were returned to Katsuragi professionally. But Katsuragi too, wouldn't even be here if this was enough to make him back down.

"In regards to contact with the outside, I have heard that it strictly includes shipping of packages too. However, as long as I don't send information in letters, wouldn't that be considered not breaking the rules?" Katsuragi asked.

"There's no change in the fact that it is prohibited by the rules. That is a rule that has not changed since the founding

of this school. But, it's not prohibited for no reason. When the school was first founded, the rules were not as strict as they are now."

The older Horikita looked at Secretary Tachibana, then slightly nodded while smiling.

"It is as he says. Originally, the package shipping that Katsuragi-kun hoped for was permitted. However, there were several students that broke their promise. They hid letters inside the packages without permission. Such a thing happened and now it is absolutely prohibited." Tachibana said.

And that's how it is, the older Horikita drilled an absolute rejection into Katsuragi.

But, Katsuragi is not the type to back down here. Even though it's for the 1st years, this man is still the leader of Class A. He immediately reassessed the situation and rebuilds his approach.

"Then once again I must ask you. Please allow me to apply for the shipping of the package directly at the shop. I will not lay a single finger on the package, I will only pay for its cost. If so, there can be no room for fraud." Katsuragi said.

"But even so it's still against the rules....."

"Against the rules? This school is ability-based, if need be I've heard you can do anything with enough points. Buying test scores or trading between students, there are many uses for points. Am I wrong?" Katsuragi continued.

It seems to Katsuragi, the value of the birthday present he

wishes to send is great.

"If that is the case, the situation will change slightly."

The older Horikita, having calmly listened to what he had to say, slightly changed his attitude.

"Before we go into the details of the points, can you let me know who it is you're sending it to?" he asks.

"It's to my twin sister. Since we don't have any parents, I'm the only one who can celebrate her birthday." Katsuragi said.

This was an outcome completely contrary to our scummy theories about romance and what not. Of all things, it was to a sibling.

"I'm going to correct you on one point but the point system is not an almighty one. Indeed the action you mentioned earlier is possible. But, that is only because 'it is not stated in the rules'. What is currently listed in the school regulations as being prohibited, won't easily be altered just like that."

It was a slightly difficult to understand statement, but it probably means something similar.

For instance, let's use test scores as an example. A while ago, I used points to buy Sudou his test scores. That in itself is not 'illegal'. It just means points were used to buy test scores.

But let's suppose that same Sudou broke the school regulations on his own by cheating to get a passing score on his test and in the case that cheating were to be revealed. It would be difficult then to erase the fact that he had 'cheated'.

"The rules of the school are there to be upheld."

"That's funny, if that is the case then the rules of this school are full of loopholes."

"There's nothing strange about that. It just means that all the school is doing is making rules that allow for a way out."

And in response to Katsuragi's question, the student council president responded in a way that made it seem as though it were obvious.

"....."

Even for the smart Katsuragi, it seems his opponent this time around is too much. In regards to their ability alone, the difference between them is too large.

This man, who for 3 years at this school, was not only in Class A but also carried out the duties of the student council president, had no weaknesses.

"You're saying even if I use my points, there's nothing I can do?" Katsuragi asked.

"There's nothing you can do. If this is something the school expressly prohibits, it will not be allowed even with the use of points."

Exactly as the older Horikita had said earlier, it means the point system is not almighty.

I'm sure Katsuragi was determined to spend a large sum to do so but if that sole remaining option of his is cut off, it meant the end of the line for him.

"If you're finished, please leave."

"I see.....I understand, please excuse me."

Katsuragi glanced at me just once, but when I gestured that I'd be staying behind to him, he quietly left.

"You're not going back?"

"What you were saying earlier, it's about when the act of breaking the rules comes to light, wasn't it?"

In the middle of that, I said that as though backing up Katsuragi.

"What do you mean by that?"

The older Horikita's gaze is now directed at me.

"Do you remember, a while ago, Sudou from our class had a fight with some students from Class C?"

The older Horikita nods as though it were natural. It did cause a huge uproar back then after all.

"Back then the Class C students made an appeal to the school and it turned into a case where it led to discussions for punishment. But, right now, Katsuragi did not break any regulations. He only thought to ask for an act that would have led to an act of breaking the regulations. And the only ones who know about that would be me and Katsuragi as well as you two of the student council. In that case, as long as you overlook this act of breaking the regulations it would be fine."

This strangely worded phrase, I'm sure if it's the two of

them they would naturally understand its meaning.

For instance, even if you commit a traffic rule violation and happen to be accosted by a police officer. If you bribe that officer and successfully get him to overlook your violation, you will not be a target for punishment and your violation would be forgiven. That's what it meant.

"And also, the usually difficult processing of such shipping. If it's you guys, it would be a simple task, wouldn't it?"

"I see. You're saying to resolve everything without first clearing it with the school, is that right?"

Katsuragi had righteously tried to secure permission from the school. But if that doesn't work, all he has to do is make sure the school never hears word of this.

But it may be an idea the honorable Katsuragi would not be able to think of.

"Being able to talk about overlooking school rule violations so boldly, what a scary delinquent!"

Only Secretary Tachibana turned to point that out to me.

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

"This school forbids acts of violence. But you, in your first meeting with me, showed no signs of holding back. That is proof enough that as long as the school does not find out, anything can be passed off."

Even if it's the student council president, he shouldn't be able to raise his hand in public like that.

"That's right. If one is to contact the outside anyways, there is no other method besides that. But, Katsuragi did not realize that fact. In that instant, he lost his only remaining option."

"Don't you think of helping him out now?"

"No. I'm not the type to simply help violate school regulations for that man's sake."

"You're rather strict."

"If you really feel that way, you should have told Katsuragi of this method before he left the room. But you didn't do that."

Ahh. It really is troublesome to deal with someone smart like him. He's seeing through me completely.

It seems he's realized I didn't want to carelessly tell Katsuragi that and put him on his guard.

"I'm done cooling off, I'm going back."

"I could tell Tachibana to prepare some tea for you now?"

"I'll pass. I don't know what you're going to put in it."

"W-what a rude 1st year!" Tachibana said.

And when I moved to leave the room, for some reason the older Horikita also stood up to escort me out.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear what Katsuragi had to say today. So even if you move behind the scenes from here on out, I won't try to investigate. You can do as you please." he told me.

"I don't really feel like doing anything of that sort though."

"That in itself is fine too. I'm just letting you know I won't be getting involved, that's all."

I was able to read information from the older Horikita's eyes to a frustrating degree.

In other words he's telling me he won't touch this matter, so go ahead and deceive the school well, is that he wants to say.

I decided to leave the student council room to escape from that gaze. He must have also seen through the fact that I was looking into making new suggestions to Katsuragi too.

"He's a formidable one, this student council president."

* * *

"Fuu..."

When I returned to the lobby of our dormitory, Katsuragi was there sitting while sighing deeply.

He immediately noticed me and stood up.

"I was waiting for you. Sorry for making you accompany me on something strange today." he told me.

"No. I was the one who insisted on following you. I'm just about sorry for not being of any help to you."

"No such thing. It was probably impossible from the start, I have no choice but to give up."

He must have been intending to deliver the present to his sister at all costs, but since it is prohibited by school regulations, it seems Katsuragi has given up.

"If you would like to, please eat it with your friends. I don't really like sweet things."

Saying that, he handed me the bag containing the present.

But, I didn't take it.

"It's wasted on me."

"I see. I suppose you wouldn't be happy even if I gave you something that was originally intended for someone else."

After saying that, Katsuragi slightly lowered his head as he moved to return to his room.

"Katsuragi."

I said that and stopped that man.

"What's the matter?"

"Perhaps I might be of some help to you. I've thought of a way to deliver that present to your sister."

"I was rejected by the student council, the ones closest to the student body. I doubt there's a solution for that."

"That's only because you don't have the determination to break the rules. If you disregard the rules, there is a way."

".....I'm not making any risky moves."

I suppose that's impossible for someone serious like Katsuragi who also happens to be the leader of Class A. Especially if it happened to be advice from a lower class, he wouldn't just obediently listen to it.

"I think it'll be worth hearing me out, though. More so if giving that present is an important thing for you."

Even though it was the summer vacation, Katsuragi had repeatedly gone to the student council room to obtain permission to deliver his present.

I understand his feelings in this matter are not half-hearted.

"Is this something we should be talking about in a place like this?"

Katsuragi pointed out the eyes of the people around us as well as the surveillance cameras. "I guess so. This isn't really the place, do you want to come to my room?"

People usually go in and out of my room on a daily basis anyways, there would be no problem even if I brought Katsuragi in.

Katsuragi and I both head towards the dormitory rooms. Fortunately, leaving aside classmates, we didn't even encounter a single student as we arrived at my room.

I opened the door to my room and turned on the lights.

"Please come in."

"It's a rather clean room, or more like, there's nothing in

here. It reminds me of the day we enrolled."

"I get that often."

Then after taking our seats, I turned on the air-conditioning and poured tea into cups.

"And? You were talking about school regulations or something earlier."

"For example, if you were trying to deliver a present from the school. It's not something easy to do. Because delivery to outside the school grounds is prohibited in general. You won't be able to access the post office either."

There is a post office located on the school grounds, however, it's more or less a place only teachers make use of.

Students do not enter it. It's obvious even if we ask them, we would be rejected. That is why Katsuragi went through the student council to try and obtain permission and make arrangements.

However since they rejected him too, he's concluded it is impossible to deliver the present physically.

"That's a fact, right? If there are no means of delivering it, there's nothing that can be done. Or are you saying there's another way to deliver a package?"

"There is. Just boldly carry the present outside the school grounds without thinking deeply about it."

"Don't be stupid. Who would be capable of doing that? It surely isn't an employee of the school, right?"

The only ones who are free to enter and leave the school grounds every day are the employees who work at the various shops located on the school grounds.

In other words, if we make use of such employees, it becomes a simple task to deliver the present. But there is a large obstacle for that.

"The people who work at this school do so under strict regulations. They won't incur risk by listening to the requests of students like us. On the other hand, they would most likely report ones like us who try to break the rules."

If that happens, Katsuragi would most likely receive a severe punishment.

"Of course not. There are no people from the outside we could trust."

I thought so, that's what Katsuragi's eyes seemed to be saying.

"You're not saying you can leave the school grounds without permission, are you?"

"Naturally that's not the case. I'm aware leaving the school grounds without permission will lead to a serious punishment."

Of course, the entrances and exits are all strictly monitored, and by some miracle, even if we managed to slip past, it would lead to expulsion if we get found out.

Even if we wanted to violate the school regulations, the risks are far too high.

"Indeed we can't make use of the employees, but if it's a fellow student, that's another story."

"Student? That's pointless. If there isn't a significant enough reason, students cannot leave the school grounds."

"But there are exceptions too that would inevitably be involved with those significant reasons."

"Exceptions.....? If they could leave the school grounds...it can't be---"

The smart Katsuragi naturally reaches such a conclusion quickly.

"---Club tournaments, huh?"

"That's how it is."

No matter how isolationist this school is, there are some things that cannot be avoided. A good example of that would be club tournaments.

For those tournaments conducted outside the school grounds, there would be no choice but to leave the school grounds and head to the venue on the outside.

"Indeed, if that is the case, it would be possible to bring things outside the school grounds. But, the school should also be aware that there is a risk of such a thing happening. There would surely be inspections of the baggage."

"Obviously. But there are a lot of ways to slip past that, aren't there? Unlike the doping tests conducted at the Olympics, it's not like they search every inch of your body."

"That's true but..."

Katsuragi seems to be giving it some thought while looking straight ahead at the same time.

"Adding onto the risk of bringing it out, the burden that would be placed on the student carrying it out is not a simple thing. But judging from your tone, Ayanokouji, you're saying there is a person you can leave it...to?"

"That's exactly right. But to convince them, it's necessary for you to visit them yourself."

* * *

Roughly 1 hour after I had invited Katsuragi to my room, I called a certain man who had just returned from his club activities.

We talked to the man whose tournament takes place the day after tomorrow, in order to ask for his cooperation.

"Huh? Don't fuck around. Who would willingly do something like that?"

Having heard Katsuragi's proposal, Sudou reacted with a rejection as though he were spitting it out.

But that's natural, if he were to be found committing a violation of the regulations, there's no telling what sort of penalties he would receive.

"In the first place there's no reason why I should listen to the request of this baldie here."

"So he says?"

It seems Katsuragi too, does not trust Sudou and is still skeptical of this plan.

"Leaving aside whether you'll accept it or not, I want to ask Sudou something. What kind of checks does the school perform?"

"Even if you ask me that."

Sudou, who is still dissatisfied with the situation, showed no signs of answering seriously.

"Depending on the circumstances, there is a chance Katsuragi will also give you a suitable reward you know."

"Reward?"

"……that's right. I'm thinking we naturally would need to pay up."

After hearing that, Sudou who had no motivation to do so earlier, began to give it serious consideration.

"Firstly in the morning, before we get on the bus to get to the tournament, we get a simple baggage check. Then our phones are confiscated. And when we get to the venue we just change our clothes and get onto the field. As for meals, once the tournament is over, we just eat on the field. I don't know the exact details though."

"What about the place where you'll get a change of clothes and the management of your baggage?"

"The locker in the locker room as usual. Of course, the teachers won't be present while you're changing, but the surveillance is strict. Even the toilets are kept separate for our use and we can't even hear the students from the other school."

Katsuragi, who was listening to our conversation, calmly simulates the situation.

"It really seems strict. In the first place, it doesn't seem to be a good idea to even bring baggage with you."

"Is it ok to bring food with you?"

"Ahh, that's up to us. There are only a few who do it, but there are those who bring it with them."

"If that's the case, it seems like a pretty simple task to bring it out."

I got up, and brought back with me a closed lunchbox and a water bottle that were placed on the shelf.

This was originally part of the equipment the school had prepared for the students. In every student's room, each one of this is placed without fail.

"I've put the gift box inside the lunchbox. It should barely fit with its size. And in regards to the bag, I've rolled it up and placed it inside the water bottle. If I do this, they shouldn't be able to find out."

It doesn't matter how much the teachers check, they wouldn't go as far as to looking at the interior contents.

"Wait a minute. Even if I could bring it out, how do I deliver it? There's no way to deliver it and I have no money either."

"If it's about money don't worry. You just have to use this."

I brought out the cash-on-deliverly slips I obtained at the post office.

"All that's left is on that day, find a chance and mail it through the post."

"You're saying like it's a simple thing. In the end, that's the hard part, isn't it?".

".....indeed, it is a realistically possible way we've thought of, but the risks are also high...."

That is because in addition to himself being involved in a violation of the school rules, he has also gotten Sudou from another class involved too.

Normally Katsuragi would have immediately backed down, but he still has not shown signs of backing down towards Sudou.

"Unfortunately I don't have any person I can ask something like this from in my class. If I could ask you to do this, won't you do this?"

Katsuragi bowed his head and asked for a favor. I could clearly understand just how important of an existence his sister was to Katsuragi.

"Sudou. I think this is something you would absolutely not accept normally. But, on the contrary, this also has a great benefit in it for you, doesn't it?"

"Benefit? You mean the reward you were talking about earlier?"

When he looked at Katsuragi, he nodded as though he understood.

"I will pay you 100,000 points as a reward if you're successful."

For his initial offer, Katsuragi threw in a tremendous amount. Sudou stiffened up at that moment.

From the perspective of someone barely making ends meet with 1000, 2000 points each day, that would be a tremendous amount.

"What's your reason for wanting to deliver that package to that point?"

At the unbelievably high amount of points, it seems on the contrary, Sudou's guard went up and he asked that question.

"...I have a twin sister. You've heard until that from Ayanokouji."

It was something he spoke of in the student council room as well. But, for just a sister he's giving her awfully special treatment.

There are a mountain load of brothers and sisters who get along well, but it would give rise to a little doubt that he would be willing to go as far as violating the rules to celebrate her birthday.

"My sister is sick, you see. On top of that, since my parents and grandparents have both passed away, she's currently left in the care of our relatives. So I'm like a replacement parent for her. If I don't celebrate her birthday, who will?" Katsuragi said.

I did think something else was up with this, but the situation hidden was a far heavier one than I had expected.

"I understood the rules of this school even before I

enrolled. But I did not expect I would not be able to send even one package. I admit that was my mistake. But even if I admit it, I still wish to send a gift to my sister from her brother no matter what."

Well, I did check the school rules briefly but they did not mention something like that specifically. At most it only mentioned leaving the school grounds without permission while enrolled is prohibited. Nothing else besides that communication with the outside is forbidden was written.

Of course, contact via letters being prohibited would also be included in that but it is a fact that 'you can't send packages' is not written in the rules.

"And so that's why you came to me."

When I shrugged my shoulders, Sudou whispered in a voice that was loud enough for Katsuragi to hear as well.

"More importantly, what do we do if we get betrayed? I don't want something like what happened back then with Class C, you know?"

A while ago, he fell into a trap and was almost kicked out of the basketball club as a result.

"There's no need to worry about that. He should have also figured out that we would think something like that."

He must surely have a proposal for this. Katsuragi also nods as though that were obvious.

"As an advance payment, I will be transferring 20,000 now. The remaining 80,000 points will be paid later as a

reward for your success."

In doing so, if something were to happen, it would inevitably be left as evidence of complicity. It would mean either side would be caught in it too if they decided to betray the other side.

"20,000 as advance payment...but..."

Even though it was a large sum, I can understand the reason Sudou is shying away from this.

He's thinking about his basketball life. If the rule violation were to be discovered during the middle of his basketball club activities, he might even be prohibited from further club activities. He is most likely afraid of that hazard.

"I've thought of a well thought-out plan. And also, I've already thought of whether this is a trap or not, but in the case that you get busted, it's obvious I will also be hit hard by it."

If this were to be found out, Katsuragi would also receive damage on par with if not even more than Sudou himself. Unless he had that kind of resolve, this couldn't be arranged. But I'm sure Katsuragi is also thinking about it.

In the case that he gives away a large sum of points, a restriction to ensure he does not get betrayed too by the other side.

"All that's left is if you simply get found out huh....."

If that happens Katsuragi won't take responsibility for that. In other words, if that happens, only Sudou would suffer.

Weighing his options on a scale, how would he make his decision.

Having briefly glanced at me, it seems Sudou has managed to reach an understanding since he had a convinced expression on his face.

"I get it. All I have to do is give it right? I just has to be me huh, someone who would accept something that dangerous."

"Is it fine……?"

Even though it was Katsuragi who wanted to persuade him, he had understood that in reality, the chances of his request being accepted were not high. Even if he were to give a large amount of points. Or he gets requested even more points in exchange, and the negotiation breaks down.

He must have had that sort of image. In that meaning, the existence of the man named Sudou was both unexpected and a saviour for Katsuragi.

"If you tell me about your sickly sister too, it's hard for me to refuse."

Sudou said while scratching his head with an emotional expression.

"……."

But the usually cautious Katsuragi did not show any signs of honestly being happy at the existence of such a Sudou.

Crossing his arms with a difficult expression, he seemed to be reflecting on this in silence.

"What? I already told you I'll do it. Is there something else?"

"Maybe he's still doubting us. Whether we'll betray him or not."

"What's that supposed to mean? He was the one asking us and now he's doubting us."

It seems Katsuragi is the type to emphasize playing it safely.

When the other side started taking a firmer attitude, he turned to look. Perhaps it's his nature to become more and more suspicious as the conversation proceeds smoothly.

Of course from the start, I also understood something like that. Unfortunately, in this particular case, it's just needless anxiety. Sudou doesn't have a public or private side to him.

If I could add to this, I'm the same as well. In regards to this, I never once even thought to trap Katsuragi. If I have to say, it's worth having Katsuragi owe us one in addition to getting private points from Katsuragi himself.

And even on the off-chance that Katsuragi betrays us, as long as we have the resolve to self-destruct we can get him involved in this as well. In regards to this point, Katsuragi, who has shown his weakness from the start, basically has no advantage over us.

From this situation, I could also tell that the present is not a bluff. Having reached such a conclusion, I had introduced Sudou as an intermediary to him. I did not know how many points he would be willing to part with, but with 100,000

points it would lead to a good deal.

"Just in case, the destination of the transfer is not Sudou but Ayanokouji. I'm sorry Ayanokouji but I'm going to have you transfer the points to Sudou after he succeeds."

"Why do I have to accept such a troublesome task?"

"Insurance, I suppose."

In the case that Sudou gets caught in trying to bring the present out or mailing it, if the transfer of such a large amount of points were to be found out, the school would cast its doubtful eyes towards it.

But by having the destination of the transfer to be someone different, it would not reach all the way back to Katsuragi.

Sudou seemed to be dissatisfied with that, but he seemed to have consented after I agreed to transfer the points over to him later.

"One more thing, I had absolute proof that you are not lying."

"Huh? What do you mean lie?"

I had known there were still parts that worried Katsuragi. It was the fact that Sudou could have lied about 'sending the present through the post'.

Even if Sudou had lied like that, there was no way for Katsuragi to ascertain that fact. Since he could not contact his family on the outside, whether or not the present was received, he would have to wait more than 2 years until

graduation to find out. By then it would be too late.

I think of several ways to come up with such evidence. And as the simplest and most reliable way, I concluded the best way would be to capture photographic evidence of the mail with a phone.

But putting that into words was slightly difficult. I don't want to bungle it up and attract Katsuragi's attention.

"Whether you really did deliver it or not, I don't have the means to ascertain that."

"What's that supposed to, there's no way I'd lie. Are you stupid?" Sudou said.

"Of course I want to believe you. But you and I still don't have the kind of relationship where I can trust you based on my believing you alone."

In front of a slightly dissatisfied Sudou, Katsuragi crossed his arms together as if to think a bit.

"Let's use a phone. The moment you mail it through the post, I want you to record a video of it and sent it to me. If you do that, your credibility would be greatly increased."

It seems Katsuragi had managed to reach one of those means pretty well.

"Haven't you been listening to me? I've told you our phones get confiscated already."

"Of course I understand. And that's why Ayanokouji, I'd like you to cooperate too."

"And this means?"

"There's still a lot of space left in this water bottle. Put your phone after turning it off into it. If we do that, you should be able to take a phone to the outside without being discovered."

Since one student is assigned one phone by rule, if in the baggage search, Sudou hands over his own phone, there would be no further suspicion.

"Of course, if you will hand over your phone. I'm also willing to give you a reward."

Saying that, he offered to pay me 10,000 points. It's not a bad deal.

"I understand. I will cooperate."

"Are you sure, Ayanokouji?"

"It's just something I could cooperate with. I also get what Katsuragi is saying. And besides, getting points would be a great help to me as well."

"Then I'll leave it to you."

Katsuragi said as he bowed his head deeply before leaving the room and going back.

"...I got nervous thanks to something unnecessary."

"Are you alright, Sudou?"

"It's my second time participating in a tournament, you see. I think I get the flow of it at least.....".

But even so, since he is aware he's going to be doing something bad, I can understand him feeling the slightest bit of resistance.

But since Sudou's lived his life as a delinquent, in regards to this as well, he's showing a comparatively easygoing attitude.

"So when are you giving your phone?"

"Let's see---if possible, I'd like to consider an alternative. If I hand over my phone, the transfer of a large amount of points will remain on it and by any chance something happens, it would only pull your leg. If possible, I'd like to use a third party's phone."

It would be best if I could obtain a phone from someone completely unrelated to the matter at hand like Ike or Yamauchi.

"No one would borrow you their phone."

"If I said I'd give them 5000 points, they'd happily lend me their phones."

"...you're a surprisingly bad guy." Sudou told me.

And so Sudou and I who had both received a request from Katsuragi, made preparations to ship the package out at a later date.

Of course, after that, Sudou managed to successfully deceive the eyes of the school and succeeded in mailing the package. And he also properly managed to video that moment as well as deleting the data of it and its transfer.

I don't know whether or not it was successfully delivered to Katsuragi's sister, but I'm sure it went well. I think it was thanks to Sudou that this was finished without any trouble, but just maybe, I also thought the older Horikita might have been involved too.

Since he should have also known we were going to attempt something, if it's that man, he should have been able to make the necessary arrangements for it. On the contrary, he would've been able to keep an eye on Sudou and watch over the moment when he violated the regulations.

It was just my selfish imagination, and I don't intend to ascertain the truth of that. Because I felt, if that were true, one day without even needing to ask, I would come to understand the truth.

* * *

Having left Ayanokouji's room, Katsuragi went back to the floor of his room using the elevator.

And when he did, for some reason, two male students were there waiting in front of his room.

"What are you doing in front of my room?"

"Ooh---! You've finally come back huh, Katsuragi. You're late, you bastard!"

"Muu...you guys are? Class D students, huh?"

These two were somehow familiar to Katsuragi, and while having his own doubts, he asked that.

"Those things aren't important, anyways, congratulations!"

And immediately after being told that. Pan! Crackers burst forth and attacked Katsuragi.

"W-what is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning? Your birthday's soon, right? That's why we came here early to celebrate your birthday!"

"C-celebrate? You guys from Class D? Why? There's no reason right?"

"There's a reason. Since we're all virgins here let's get along from now on too. Yeah?"

Katsuragi retreats in response to the vulgar language, but Ike forcibly hands a birthday present to him.

"Please eat this. It's a birthday cake chosen by our idol Kushida Kikyo-chan!"

"I-I can't accept---"

"It's ok, it's ok."

The box is forcibly pressed onto him.

"See you later!"

And so the Class D male students dashed away with that.

The only things left behind were the cracker garbage scattered in front of the room and the cake.

"Even though it's a cake, it's rather warm."

When Katsuragi slowly opened the box, it was a chocolate cake inside which quickly cooled down to room temperature and became muddy.

"...this is, a new form of harassment.....?"

Katsuragi could not help but think that.

Chapter 03: Even then, there is danger lurking in daily life

It all began with a sudden incident at 6 o'clock in the evening on a certain day.

Since I received a mail on my phone from the school, I decided to check it and when I did, it seems due to problems occurring at the Waterworks Bureau, the entire dormitory has received an alert that it would not have access to water for a while.

When I tried turning the tap to test it, indeed no water came out. It seems repair attempts will be taking some time to finish and if it happened to be prolonged, it could take up to early morning to be fixed.

But the school too, is properly looking after the students and in the case that it becomes necessary, more than 2 liters of water at a time will be handed out to students at the cafeteria.

And since the cafeteria is expected to be crowded, a warning statement was also released stating as such. And as a prohibited matter, the convenience stores that were expected to be majorly crowded were marked as temporarily unusable.

In addition, free-to-drink mineral water is installed at Keyaki Mall but it is forbidden to bottle that water for ourselves and take it back with us.

That's not my problem though. If there is a problem, it

would have to be the toilet. Although there is water in the tank, since it can only be used to flush once caution is necessary.

"As for drinks...there's still a little bit left."

The tea in the refrigerator would only last for about a single cup, but that should be enough for today. For dinner, I'll have to endure it by making a dish without using any water.

After that, as I began to indifferently make preparations to cook dinner, my phone suddenly rang.

But as I moved to answer, the ringing ceased. It lasted for about 2 calls.

As I reached my hand out towards my phone to check the caller identity, it turned out to be Horikita Suzune's name.

It's unusual for her to call me. Even if Horikita had business with me, she usually makes do via chat.

Since I got slightly curious about the matter, I decided to call back. However, no matter how many times I called, Horikita did not pick up.

While feeling it was slightly mysterious I gave up on calling Horikita, placed my phone on top of the table and returned to cooking my dinner.

I'll cook fried rice today. It was a simple matter to cook fried rice using the rice I had bought in advance. After adding the eggs, the rest were just the finishing touches. And it was then that the phone rang again.

Once I stopped the fire and walked towards the phone, again the ringing stopped. Looking at the phone, it was like before, a call from Horikita.

Once I call back again, as expected, no matter how many times the call rings, Horikita did not answer.

I felt slight doubt at this mysterious situation. Perhaps coincidentally, right after the call ended, she's also busy. That was also a possibility but from Horikita's personality that's hard to imagine.

She's the type to only call when she's in a calm state of mind. Even if something unexpected had happened, ending the call two times and not answering when I called back was strange.

From here the conclusion I had drawn was that Horikita might currently be stuck in an unexpected situation.

"Yeah right."

Exasperated at myself for thinking too deeply about this, I decided to stop cooking for now and answer her through the chat.

"It seems you've called me two times, what's the matter?".

And when I sent that message, without even a time delay, the read notification appeared.

But from the message that had been read, a reply did not come. I waited for quite a long time but a reply did not come.

"I'm cooking right now so my response may be late, but if

you contact me I will reply."

I sent that to her. Like before, the read notification appeared but no reply came and so I decided to return to my cooking.

* * *

Even after I had finished dinner, there was no contact from Horikita. After finishing the last of my barley tea, once again I felt a slightly bothersome feeling.

"It can't be---is it really a dangerous situation?"

Getting caught up in an unexpected situation and having collapsed somewhere, that can't be it right? There's no mistaking that it at least isn't the usual Horikita-like reaction.

I wonder if it's a possibility that her phone is simply out of order and that's why I can't contact her. But, if that's the case it would not be necessary to contact me for advice. She would simply need to contact the school at a later date.

If Horikita had a friend who would check up on her room at a time like this it would be a quick matter to resolve but...sadly I could not think of a single friend who would do that for her.

"Are you ok?"

Although that was a cliche line, I try to probe her situation like that.

"Oooo.....".

The read notification did not appear. Unlike a while ago, the situation where she had placed her phone had changed. Perhaps the battery of her phone had run out, or it had automatically turned itself off. Such a thing could also be considered possible but...what other possibilities could I think of.

In the first place, calling me on phone is suspicious. What is the reason for that?

In any case, the fact that she's not saying it straightforward is strange. Then, if I realistically think about it--- The first possibility would be that while Horikita had business with me, she is currently caught up in another matter.

For instance, she's been called by the teachers or she's currently being called by a classmate. But that line is thin. In the middle of summer vacation, at furthermore at night, it's hard to imagine the school would call her out and I don't think there exists a friend that would contact Horikita.

If so, the winning theory would be that she has something to talk to me about. Even though she had tried to call me, she became involved in some sort of accident and became unable to do so. Either that or she fell asleep or forgot and so forgot to call back. Something along the lines of that.

"It just doesn't fit."

Horikita is an honor student and she can handle herself. I can't imagine such a Horikita simply forgetting to reply. Even though I had tried to call her directly, it didn't connect, and I was forced to switch over to chat.

However even in that chat, she did not send a sentence in

reply. For a period of time, read notifications did appear even though the fact that it's no longer the case now leads me to imagine that it is still operational.

"I'm worried....."

Even if I stay here, the things I can do for her are limited but I'm worried about her too so I can't just leave her alone.

For now, to let her know that I'm trying to contact her, I decided to call her again.

If I go this far, unless she's considerably busy or have not noticed my calls at all, she should answer. Again, I call Horikita's address.

As I did that, on the fourth call, at least I succeeded in making contact with the other side.

"Hello....."

Horikita did not seem to be surprised but she seemed to have a slightly tired voice.

"Hey. Sorry for calling you so many times, but I got worried ever since I received your call. Were you sleeping?"

"That's not the case. Sorry for not replying."

I did not sense any sort of panic or any sense of an accident having occurred.

"Right now I'm a bit busy so if that's all you wanted to say can I cut the call now."

Once Horikita said that I could hear from the mouthpiece

of her phone a metallic sound.

"What was that?"

"No. Nothing in particular. Goodbye."

It seems she didn't want to be investigated any further since she hurriedly ended the call.

I am a bit worried but I did manage to make contact and the person herself is saying everything's fine. I decided to forget this for now and slowly spend my night.

* * *

Nothing would happen today.

I had thought the whole day would end just like that. But, around 9PM, the screen of my phone lit up.

A new message had arrived.

[Are you awake?]

It was such a chat from Horikita.

"I'm awake."

[I'd like to talk with you for a bit, do you have time now?]

It was roughly two hours since our last call that she made this sort of contact.

"I'll call you."

After saying that to her, I immediately called Horikita's

phone and with just one call, she picked up.

"What's wrong?"

"There's something I wanted to ask you....."

Horikita said that with a slightly disarrayed manner of speech like before, and after that briefly went silent.

"Let's say for instance there is a turtle."

"Huh?"

All of a sudden, such a crazy story came forth from Horikita.

"That turtle is an extremely smart and talented turtle. But, if it happened to be involved in an accident and was flipped upside down, don't you think that would be a terrible thing? It won't be able to stand back up on its own anymore."

"That's right. It's just, when speaking of normal turtles not being able to get back up, they can extend their necks and use their legs to balance themselves and in most cases, they can regain their initial posture. By the way, the ones that are unable to get back up on their own would be giant tortoises and sea turtles. It's because both species are born under conditions that lead to them being unable to flip themselves back up."

"....."

When I added my unnecessary words, Horikita went silent.

"That was unnecessary. It would be easier if you honestly

assumed that they would be unable to get back up on their own and listened."

I thought so. Even I thought that was a spectacularly unnecessary addon.

"And? That situation where it can't get back up, is something the matter with it?"

"If you encountered such a situation, what would you do? I just wanted to ask for future reference."

"If I did, I would probably wake it up. It's not that much of a bothersome task."

Indeed I would have no reason to save it but I also have no reason to abandon it either.

If that is the case, I might as well extend a helping hand. But I wonder what exactly this story is leading to?

If I consider the situation simply, it would be that Horikita is currently, like the turtle, in a situation where she can't get back up on her own. But from the call, I could not detect any sense of panic and she herself seems calm. It probably means it's not that urgent of a situation.

"So...what's troubling you?".

In response to Horikita who was beating around the bush, I straightforwardly asked her that.

No matter what problems she's facing, there's no profit to be had in prolonging this. If that's the case, this makes hearing it out go faster.

"I'm not particularly in any trouble."

"No but, right now our conversation's going in that direction, isn't it?"

"I was just talking about an overturned turtle, it has nothing to do with me."

"...then why did you talk about that turtle?"

"I just felt like it. I wanted to tell you about the overturned turtle."

This is messed up.

"This isn't like you, no, asking for help isn't like you either but...you called me because you didn't have anyone else you could rely on right? If that's the case, saying it quickly would be better."

I admonished her like that and after a while, she began to talk.

"If you feel like helping people no matter what then it can't be helped, it's not like I can't allow you to advise me on this."

"O-oh. And? That's fine so let me know."

The Horikita who had been twisted by a sense of superiority had said an unbelievable thing like that. But at this point, anything goes.

"I'm just having a little trouble."

And then finally, she admitted it honestly.

"Where are you now?"

"I'm in my room." Horikita answered.

"Don't tell me, are black bugs showing up?"

If that's the case even if she can afford to casually talk, it easily gives off an image that she cannot easily resolve it. It would also be accurate for a period. However the dormitories are kept clean and Horikita also happens to live on the upper floor. The chances of them appearing in her room are low.

"That's not the case. If that were so, I could deal with it myself."

"How would you deal with it? Detergent? Hot water? Slippers? And if none of those, then how?"

I also noticed she did not immediately tell me the details of her problem. No matter how much I'm blessed with reasoning abilities, I cannot imagine Horikita's situation.

"The reason I'm in trouble is...actually it's fine. I'll solve it myself."

"You're trying to solve it yourself, but it's already been more than two hours that you haven't resolved it yet, hasn't it?"

She should have already been caught up in the problem by the time she attempted to contact me. If so, she should've struggled quite a bit already.

"Well....."

So that's an affirmation, however perhaps the details of it seem to be weighing quite a bit on her since she didn't reply immediately.

But then---

".....well.....indeed I'm close to my physical limits. I'll tell you honestly."

At last I can cut to the chase. I thought that but Horikita cut in like this.

"...could you come to my room now....?"

It was a meaningful statement that was equal parts shy and disgusted.

"From now, but it's already past 9 o'clock."

"I understand but...there's no other way to solve this other than having you come here...."

It was a burning voice. It was a frustrated voice that sounded slightly pained.

"There might be some resistance though. To go all the way up to the upper floors where the girls live."

"I understand that, but unless I get you to move directly, it would be difficult to solve this."

And just like that, Horikita onesidedly ended the call.

"This seems a bit scary...but I suppose there's nothing else to do but go."

In any case, it wouldn't be nice to be late so grabbing only my phone and the keys to my room I left my room.

* * *

Feeling like I'd rather not run into any girls, I aimed for the time when there would be no one else using the elevator. Sneaking around like this is pathetic, but I'm just that type of person.

Then with the right timing, as I reached the 13th floor where Horikita lives, I pressed the chime.

After waiting for a while, since there were no signs of her opening the door, I tried opening it myself and since the door was not locked, the door simply opened.

"Horikita?"

Horikita's room is a 1K but since there is a door installed inside too, I could not see into the bedroom.

In the corridor and the kitchen that had barely changed from the time of our initial enrollment, there were no signs of Horikita.

"You're alone right? I don't mind if you come inside."

I heard that from the other side of the door.

"Even though we're in the dormitories right now, that's dangerous." I said.

"It's alright, even if a suspicious person were to enter now, the destructive power of my right hand will be more than

enough."

What's that phrase supposed to mean? While thinking that, I entered the room.

Then I walked into the room. Horikita had her back turned facing me and I could not see her expression, but I could not see any particular change about her.

The interior of the room too, was simple and I could not see any particular place that could be considered strange.

"I'm here. What's the problem?"

"If you see, you'll understand."

Having said that, Horikita slowly stood up and turned to face me.

And then, at that moment, incomprehensible feelings and as well as understanding emotions simultaneously burst forth from inside me.

"I see.....so that's it?"

"That's it."

I glanced away from her in understanding and towards the tip of her right arm.

And there I saw a small water bottle for girls' use that was completely engulfing her hand.

"How should I put it...this is a disaster completely unlike you. Don't tell me you were playing with it?"

"Don't be stupid."

"No, I mean it's possible right? It feels like sandwiching a pointy corn between your hands and eating it, doesn't it?"

Perhaps saying something irritated her, as she swung her right arm around with a sharp expression.

"I-it's a joke."

"There's no point in telling a joke if it isn't funny. Yours wasn't funny, it's a failure." Horikita replied.

"That's not because my joke wasn't funny, it's because I made fun of you isn't it?"

"This happened as a result of me washing it. That's enough could you get it off already?"

So that seems to be the story.

I grabbed the tip of the water bottle and pulled. But when I did, Horikita herself was pulled along with it.

"It's already bad enough that you can't get it off yourself. Please step it up."

If her body itself gets pulled along with the bottle, then I won't be able to take off what normally could be taken off.

"I already understand something like that. It's just, I'm already quite tired so please make it brief."

It seems after having struggled for more than two hours, Horikita is already starting to get exhausted.

I grabbed hold of the water bottle again. Then I added some more strength to it and pulled. Horikita too, endured the pain as she stepped backwards at the same time.

But it seems she's already used to it at this point since she showed no signs of feeling her arms being pulled off.

"This is pointless. At this rate it probably won't come off."

"I see, as expected..."

It seems she had already expected that the water bottle would not come off as Horikita showed no signs of strong disappointment.

"Looks like we'll need to rub it with soap and slowly pull it off. Let's go to the kitchen."

"But that would only continue this disaster, haven't you been informed that there's a water outage right now?" Horikita said.

That's right. We won't be able to use water until 12 o'clock in the dormitories. The only water that can be used right now is the water in the toilet, but I doubt Horikita would be fine with using it.

"I'll be going to the cafeteria for a moment."

There's no other way except this. If I could just get my hands on some water it would be possible to pull it off.

Immediately leaving the room, I headed for the cafeteria. But once there, I was assaulted an unexpected incident.

"I'm sorry but a lot more students came than expected and we're out of water."

The old lady at the cafeteria apologized in that sorry tone. It seems the students who needed water for their dinner had taken it all.

"I understand. I'll buy some at the vending machine."

"If you could please do that?"

For just pulling an arm out of a water bottle, a large amount of water should not be necessary. About two glasses worth of water should be enough. Thinking that, I headed towards a vending machine installed near the cafeteria.

But it seems misfortune tends to overlap. All the water, tea, juice and the such in the vending machine have all been sold out.

"...this is the first time I've seen a vending machine completely emptied..."

* * *

"So? You've come back without anything in hand?"

The water bottle woman glared at me, but it couldn't be helped since there was nothing I could have done.

"I wanted to bring some from my room but I've already used up all my water."

This too, cannot be explained as anything other than a tragedy brought forth from this current of misfortune.

"So what do we do?"

"If you're fine with it, we could ask Ike or Sudou to share some water with us?"

"I'll pass."

I had already expected this kind of answer so I had written it off before even asking, but as expected.

"If you're uncomfortable with borrowing from them, I can lie and tell them that I'm the one in need." I said.

"That's not it. I'm opposed to using the water they have at hand, there's no telling what they put in there....."

She's treating them almost as if they're bacteria.

That's definitely not the case...is what I'd like to say but I don't have the confidence to make that statement. Those guys, they have a habit of leaving drinking water or tea as it is.

If Horikita asks them to hand it over they would probably give the cleanest water they have but if I tell them I wanted the water, depending on the situation, they might hand me back something of that kind. There's nothing more terrifying than malevolence without ill intent.

"Then do you want to challenge it again?"

"Yes. Please continue even if it hurts for me."

Horikita offered me her right arm as though she had

prepared her resolve. It seems she wishes to escape from this as soon as possible. I could see slight sweat forming on her arm.

"Alright, then I'll be putting my back into it for a bit."

I would also like to free Horikita as quickly as possible and return to my room. Thinking to endure the ridiculous posture for a moment, I pulled on the water bottle.

I then used twice as much power as before to pull the bottle off but it only resulted in Horikita making an expression of agony. Despite that, Horikita did not raise any complaints and endured the pain. However, the water bottle, as though sucking on her arm, did not come off.

"This is really, as I thought, going to need some water."

I'll need to make it slippery first before pulling it out. If it still won't come off after that, it might become necessary to call emergency services.

"You're telling me to wait until 12 o'clock? In this state?"

"If there's still someone we can rely on from among my contacts, the remaining male would be Hirata." I told her.

"If it's him there's no doubt as to the quality of the water but.....I'd rather not be in his debt."

"Even if you say debt, on the front I'll be the one needing the water. There should be no problem for you."

"...that is indeed true."

She still seemed to be dissatisfied somewhat but she seems to have accepted that a sacrifice needs to be made to escape this urgent situation and accepted my plan.

"Then I'll contact him promptly."

I attempt to call Hirata. However, even now, misfortune seems to overlap.

No matter how many times I called, Hirata showed no signs of picking up. On top of that, even when I tried sending him a message, it was not read.

"He's not noticing, maybe he's asleep. In any case, there's no response."

"I see. Feelings of joy and sadness are both mixing together confusingly and making it complicated for me." Horikita said.

"Then next is, no other choice but to rely on Kushida or Sakura."

"Please ask Sakura-san then."

As if to say Kushida is absolutely out of the question, she replied to me with that immediately.

"Are you still on bad terms with Kushida?" I asked her.

"There's no need for us to get along. And besides, there are many actions of hers I still don't understand."

"What do you mean you don't understand?"

".....the exam on the cruise ship. She abandoned victory from the start and instead aimed for a draw."

Remembering the special exam from a while back, Horikita crossed her arms together.

Unfortunately the water bottle stuck on her arm made her look uncool and hence the intensity of her statement was lacking.

"She's a pacifist by nature. She'll probably choose the outcome where everybody's happy."

"I have no intention of denying outcome 1 entirely. However if one is the "target" themselves that it's out of the question."

She begins to speak sharply.

The exam that took place on the ship separated students into 12 groups in a game to find the "target".

There were four possible outcomes and among them, outcome 1 is the hardest outcome to achieve wherein the identity of the "target" is known to everyone yet is cleared without anyone betraying the group. In exchange, the reward itself is considerable where the entire group receives 1,000,000 points without it being divided up. The only drawback to this outcome is, the class to which the "target" belongs does not earn any points.

Since the other classes equally gain valuation, the difference between them does not change. She did not take advantage of the privileged position of the "target". That is what Horikita is dissatisfied with.

"That situation absolutely favored Class D. That means in other words, the identity of the "target" absolutely needed to

remain hidden, and should have remained hidden. However, everyone ended up knowing that Kushida-san was the "target". I think in regards to that, she herself was involved."

In other words, Horikita is trying to say that Kushida, by doing something, ended up causing outcome 1.

"That's just your speculation, right?"

"That's right. But the possibility of that is overwhelmingly high. I'm assuming her guilt."

Horikita added more force to her words. It's not like I don't understand how she feels but the water bottle stuck to her arm simply makes it look uncool.

It's just, I'll need to correct Horikita's idea a little here. She's still at a premature stage.

"I can understand how you feel but that's no good, right?"

"Do you mean saying this without any evidence that she's betrayed us?"

"That's not it. I'm saying it's all your responsibility. I'll just assume Kushida did betray us in fact, if we assume that to be true then the fault lies with you for allowing her to betray us. Adding on, even if Kushida did betray you, you had to win at all costs. Am I wrong?" I asked her.

She understood it clearly, yet in response to this difficult demand she clashes against it with her own correct answer. Horikita, against this unreasonable attack, makes her objection.

"Don't be unreasonable. Do you understand just how unrealistic that is?"

"Unrealistic? I don't think so. Let me repeat myself, if Kushida did indeed betray us and guided the group to outcome 1 that is an amazing thing. This is an area you cannot succeed in half-heartedly. In other words, in the previous exam, you were completely outsmarted in regards to Kushida, with a difference in between your capabilities and hers."

Of course my statement had assumed Kushida had indeed betrayed us, in the case that this is not true, that statement won't hold true.

Ryuuen or Katsuragi, I don't know which but with a more powerful force, an outcome to force everyone of the (Dragon) group to bow down had been taken. Even in that case, the fact that Horikita had been outsmarted does not change.

"You had the "target" in your class. And so you were so confident of your victory that you did not take any further actions. If so, the responsibility for that lies with the people on the same team. If you're aiming for Class A, you need to be able to manage at least that." I told Horikita.

".....you're saying some difficult things."

"I understand your feelings of frustration. But even so, this is the path you chose. And besides, you've matured even more than before. Even if I said the same thing to you when we first met you absolutely wouldn't have even heard me out." I continued.

That's right.

Slowly but steadily, Horikita's mindset is slowly beginning to develop into that of an adult.

Unlike when we first met, she's becoming a girl who does not reject everything.

"I get it already. I'll accept the results of the exam. I confess I was thinking too optimistically. But right now the important thing, in any case, is to get this arm free."

That's correct, this seems like a situation where some professor somewhere would say that while nodding.

"I'll try relying on Sakura a bit." I said.

Since it's getting late, rather than calling her I decided to use the chat to call out to her.

"Sakura, I think you're also aware of the water outage problem. But I'm out of drinking water in my room and I'm in a bit of a bind. The vending machine's also all sold out, if you're fine with it would you share some water with me?"

I waited a while after having sent the message but there were no signs of it being read.

"This is no good. Maybe she's asleep but it doesn't seem like she's noticed."

"Honestly, we're completely out of luck today..."

"You want to take it off right now don't you?"

"If I wanted to wait another day in this state I wouldn't have even called you."

I suppose that's true. She probably wants to get it off as quickly as possible.

"If so, that means you also have no choice but to take suitable risks too."

".....suitable?"

While on guard, she asks that. Horikita too, most likely, also understands this in her head.

"We'll leave this room and go to Keyaki Mall where we can utilize water. There's no other way." I said.

"So it's going to be like that in the end....."

She put her hands on her forehead, but it doesn't matter which gesture she makes right now, it ends up looking ridiculous.

"Right now this period is mostly used for eating meals, taking a bath and other various things so it's our chance."

As a matter of fact, before I came to this room, before I went down to the cafeteria, I did not encounter a single classmate of ours. If she cannot hold on until 12 o'clock there's no other choice but to take this much risk at least.

"I can't take this risk. Can't you ask your friends?"

"Unfortunately that's impossible today, it seems they've promised to go out together to the karaoke. They're not here."

"Honestly. I don't mean to repeat myself any more than this, but what a day..."

"Let's go now so we can end this in a poof."

"W-wait. I really can't go outside like this."

"Then do you want to hide your hand with something? It's already hidden by a water bottle though."

"That kind of joke is unnecessary."

"I-I get it. I'll apologize so put down that hand you're raising."

Since she moved to hit me again, I panicked and quickly took my distance.

"Do you have anything like a cloth?"

"Cloth....? If it's a handkerchief."

Saying that, Horikita brought out a white handkerchief from a shelf.

As I took it from her, I covered it from above Horikita's water bottle.

"...putting it bluntly this is suspicious. More than that, I feel the length of it isn't enough."

Although most of it is covered, it's still meaningless if the tip of the bottle is peeking out. "Do you have anything bigger?"

"If it has to be something bigger, it'll have to be a bath towel....."

This time she brings out a bath towel. I placed it on the arm

with the water bottle.

"Well if it's this it should be....."

It's just, it'll be a mystery as to why she's walking outside with a bath towel in hand.

In a sense, it would be a lot more conspicuous than simply having an arm trapped inside a water bottle.

"It's a little unstable, if I walk the bath towel will fall off."

"Shouldn't it be fine if you hold it down with the other hand?"

Having folded the bath towel, she gave off an image as though she were about to enter the bath. If it's like this, yeah, it looks a lot better.

"If a third party were to see my situation, what kind of impression would they have?"

"Let's see..."

Firstly as a premise, nobody would walk around in the dormitories with a bath towel nor would they go outside. Naturally one would wonder. And then if I were to stand beside her, it would be an even greater mystery.

"Depending on the situation.....I wonder. For instance, maybe they might think you borrowing the bathtub in my room."

That might be too much of a leap but since I myself saw it that way, I said that.

"Rejected."

She removes the bath towel and refuses. I too don't want to be caught up with that kind of suspicious doubt.

"How about walking while putting your hands inside your bag?"

"I don't even want to imagine that. Rejected. Can you think of a slightly better idea?"

Even though we're in a pinch she's still first-class when it comes to complaining.

"If that's the case let's just go like this? It'll be light and there won't be anything to fall off like a towel or a handkerchief."

".....let's see."

Rather than wasting time thinking up this and that it's better to simply act.

Dragging along a slightly hesitant Horikita with me, I stepped out into the corridor.

"Ok, there aren't any signs of people around. Let's go."

"W-wait a minute. I haven't put on my shoes properly yet."

Since she could only use one hand that's taking up a lot of time as well. After having spent some time, the two of us head into the corridor.

"There's a faucet on the road to school, isn't there? If we can make it there it should be alright."

If we walk at a normal pace, we should arrive there in 5 minutes.

Since the situation is the situation, it may take twice as long as that but as long as we can leave the dormitory, under the cover of darkness it would be fine.

We made it to the front of the elevator. Since both elevators weren't moving, it would be impossible to get on them as well.

"It's useless, Ayanokouji-kun. We can't use the elevator."

"What?"

"There's a surveillance monitor in the lobby on the 1st floor right? I don't know who's seeing it."

Indeed on the 1st floor, the footage captured by the surveillance camera inside the elevator is being displayed on a monitor. Horikita is concerned about being seen on it.

Even if she can poorly hide her arm in front of the camera, she won't be able to avoid giving them a mysterious footage.

"Then do you want to use the stairs?"

If we're to descend from this point, it would take quite a bit of time. And the fact that one of her hands is unusable makes it a little dangerous.

"Rather than letting anyone see this clumsy figure of mine, I'd rather choose the stairs." Horikita said.

After weighing struggles and danger on a scale against her pride. Horikita chose pride.

There are two emergency staircases, each one located equidistantly from the elevator. No matter which one we use, we'll have to go past the doors of the student rooms again, it can't be helped.

Bringing along a Horikita who seemed to be hiding behind my back while walking, we headed towards the staircase.

Along the way, if I had to borrow Horikita's words "what a day". In other words, it's an unlucky day.

I heard the doors to the room of an unknown student opening. About three rooms back from where we were standing.

"T-this is bad. That's Maezono-san's room."

Maezono of Class D, huh? No doubt one of the people Horikita does not wish to encounter right now. But there's no room for escape.

But from the door that was slowly opening, it wasn't Maezono that came out, but her friend Kushida. I wondered if this was yet another unexpected incident for Horikita.

"Thank you Kushida-san. I'll repay the favor next time."

"No, it's ok. Don't mind it. Good night Maezono-san."

It seems she came to play in Maezono's room. Perhaps Maezono meant to see her off from inside, but I couldn't see her face.

As the door closed, Kushida, without realizing the presence of me and Horikita, headed towards the elevator.

"That was dangerous..."

"Right."

If she had only looked back, Kushida would have noticed our presence. Uncomfortable sweat starts to form.

In any case, this place is too conspicuous. We have to head out through the emergency exits as quickly as possible.

But as we took the next step, Maezono's room's door opened again.

"Kushida-san. You forgot something, you forgot something!"

Saying that Maezono came outside. Naturally, Kushida turned around.

"Hmm, Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san. Good evening."

"Y-yeah."

There was a brief exchange of words but it seems firstly she'll be checking what she forgot. Kushida heads towards Maezono.

And of course, Maezono also inevitably notices us. Horikita turns rigid. Receiving both Kushida and Maezono's gaze, she becomes unable to move.

"You forgot your phone."

"Ahh, sorry. Thank you. That saved me---"

"Let's go Ayanokouji-kun. There's no need to stay here for

long."

Saying that now while Kushida's attention is focused on her forgotten belonging, this is the chance, she uses the tip of the water bottle to push my back. I suppose if this form of hers is seen, Horikita's pride would be torn to shreds.

While being pushed, I reached the emergency exit and attempt to open the door.

However---

"It won't open.....".

"It's a joke, right? There's no way an emergency exit won't open."

"No, it seriously won't open."

Locking an emergency exit is normally prohibited so this is probably---

"Where are the two of you going?"

Perhaps she was curious about the two of us attempting to leave through the emergency exit, Kushida, having finished her business with Maezono, approached us.

"That's, no. We were just thinking about going down using the stairs."

That was a reason I didn't understand well, but there was nothing else I could have answered with except that.

"If I remember, the east staircase's power is cut right now so you won't be able to use it. It would be dangerous in the

dark. I think the west one would be usuable?"

"I see. So that's how it is."

Horikita, without attempting to call out to Kushida, was simply hiding behind my back.

"Horikita-san feels different than usual, did something happen?

Kushida called out to her like that. On top of that it was past her own room. It seems she's intending to come all the way in front of us.

Perhaps Kushida's actions were also conveyed to Horikita, she answered with a slightly loud voice.

"There's nothing wrong in particular."

Those words of Horikita included a wish to make her stop coming. Perhaps they were conveyed, but Kushida stopped.

"I see. If there's anything troubling you, please tell me. Earlier, Maezono-san also seemed to be troubled because of the water outage and so she wasn't able to use the water. I have more than enough water."

Right now it seems the Kushida in front of us has something Horikita wants more than anything.

If she chooses to ask now, she would be able to get her hands on it easily but--- Using the tip of the water bottle like the muzzle of a gun, she presses it against my back.

By that, she probably means she wouldn't forgive me if I

relied on Kushida.

"Then Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun. Good night, both of you."

"Ohh, good night."

* * *

Using the emergency staircase, it's taken us quite a bit of time to descend from the 13th floor to the 1st floor.

There was the possibility that the lobby would be crowded due to the water outage but fortunately neither students nor administrators were present.

"We can go if it's now."

"Yes."

Through the entrance, both me and Horikita, who was hiding in my shadow and following me, left.

However---From the darkness spreading out before us we could see several male and female students approaching us while chatting. They don't seem to be Class D students, however, it didn't matter now who they were.

Not having enough time to leave the dorm itself, she turns her back as if to return.

"At this rate they'll see us....."

Slowly their presence approaching the dorm is becoming larger. Perhaps it would be better to return to the emergency staircase.

In a panic, we opened the door to the emergency staircase. Having come this far, will our misfortune turn into a chain of misfortune? I could hear a voice coming from above us.

Listening carefully, it appears to be a male student living on perhaps the 3rd or 4th floor that's descending.

It's often common for students living on the lower floors to not use the elevator. It's not strange even if they used the emergency staircase.

No longer able to ascend up the stairs, we were forced to hurriedly turn back towards the lobby.

"There's no other choice but the elevator.....!"

"Is that ok? You'll be seen on the monitor."

"I'll have to use you to cover myself. Since we know the position of the camera we should be able to do it."

It would certainly be a strange thing, but it's certainly not an impossible task. It was a method I would have liked to avoid if possible but since there's no longer an escape route, I have no other choice.

We quickly get on the elevator that's supposed on the left side of the 1st floor. And then, as I quickly stepped in front of the camera's line of sight, Horikita stood behind me like a ghost and hid her arm.

If it's like this even if we're seen slightly on the monitor, they wouldn't notice anything. In any case we need to leave the 1st floor.

I randomly pressed a button to make the elevator ascend.

"For now we're safe but...this is just the start."

"I'll just give up. This isn't a state where I can just go outside. Since I've come this far I'll just tough it out until the water outage is fixed."

I felt it was a bitter decision she had made, but Horikita seems to have concluded as such. If that's the case, we'll just have to return to the 13th floor.

I cancelled the random floor I had pressed and pressed the button for the 13th floor.

No more trials should befall us. As both me and Horikita felt relief somewhere inside us, without any notice it came. The elevator's speed, which had been rapidly rising until now, suddenly slows.

Recently whenever I get on an elevator, good things never happen, so I did not even have time to think what was happening. It's neither a breakdown nor a mistake in pressing the button.

This is---

The elevator came to a stop on the 5th floor. That's right, a student on the 5th floor had pressed the elevator button. No matter who gets on, there's no avoiding them seeing Horikita's abnormal appearance.

At this point, having a large number of people crowd the elevator is likelier to keep someone from noticing.

However ruthlessly enough, there was only one male student standing in front of the door as it opened.

Of all things, to run into him.....

That man, whether he's noticed us or not, strides into the elevator with his usual, unchanging elegance. Not even sparing us a glance, he made a beeline for the mirror inside the elevator.

Then, staring into the mirror, he begins to check his hair for any abnormalities.

"....."

Horikita also seemed to be stunned at the existence of this man who seemed to be completely immersed inside his own world. Then, bringing out a comb he seems to always carry around with him, he began to set his hair.

"Elevator Boy, I shall request the top floor."

While staring at his reflection in the mirror that man.....the student of Class D named Kouenji Rokusuke, said that to me.

There are a lot of things I wanted to interject then, but right now, it's better to shut up and obey him.

I silently pressed the button to the top floor as the door to the elevator closed. We once again ascend.

Perhaps Kouenji has no interest in us while checking his hair, but he showed no signs of paying attention to us. It was natural if we were complete strangers, but even so, we were classmates. I think sparing us a glance at least would have

been normal.

But we have gained a narrow escape from certain death. If it's Kouenji, he would have no interest in Horikita at all so he would not notice the water bottle.

Now all we'd have to do is not commit any actions that would attract his attention and spend this brief while. That's all. And even if by some chace, he happened to glance at us, Horikita had adjusted her body position to make it look alright.

While maintaining her position in the camera's blind spot, she also managed to cover herself from Kouenji.

The elevator passed the 10th floor.

I did think what business he had on the top floor, but I can't ask that. I did think, unexpectedly he might really not have any reason to go there but we made it all the way to the 10th floor.

As the elevator doors slowly opened, both me and Horikita almost simultaneously stepped out. In the end, without ever taking his eyes off the mirror, Kouenji continued all the way up to the top floor.

Although we managed to avoid further problems, Horikita, after a brief, fast walk, returned in front of her room.

"It's impossible to do anymore than this. It's too much to go around walking outside, cautious of the surroundings in this state."

Saying that, she suddenly went back into her room. She

must have felt quite anxious.....

After that, following her, I also entered the room. And, with that timing, my phone vibrated.

[I'm sorry for the late reply, I was looking up something and I didn't notice.]

From Sakura, a response like that came back to me.

"Sakura-san?"

"Yeah."

[It's about water, right? Of course it's ok. Would a plastic bottle be enough?]

"That's more than enough, thank you. Is it ok if I come and get it now?".

"Yes, I'll be waiting."

Sakura replied like that. Whenever I talk to her directly in person, it's hard to continue a conversation but when it's through the chat, it flows really smoothly.

"Rejoice, Horikita. It seems Sakura will share water with us. I've got her consent so I'll be going now."

"Thank you. Please do make sure not to tell Sakura-san about me."

"Yeah. You'll soon be parting with this figure, do you mind if I take a commemorative photo?" I asked her.

Since it seemed like she was about to start swinging the

water bottle at me, I panicked and quickly ran into the corridor.

"What a fearsome woman. Judging from her athletic assessment, if she swings it down on my head I could die".

It would leave a stain on my history if I died from getting my head smashed in by a high school girl whose arm was stuck inside a water bottle.

* * *

"Here you go. It's off."

After overcoming a long struggle, I somehow succeeded in removing the water bottle from Horikita.

"Honestly this was a totally disastrous day....."

I had time taken away from me by a water bottle, I could understand the need to feel such things.

"Ayanokouji-kun, take care not to mention this to anyone else."

"Before you start warning me, isn't there something you'd like to say first?"

".....thank you."

Honesty? Not really, but it seems like she is capable of gratitude.

"But even so, not being able to take your arm out of a water bottle, it's a happening completely unlike you Horikita."

"Leave me be. It's not trouble I got into because I like it."

Well, it was a danger lurking close by. Or perhaps it just means you can never tell what will happen next in the world.

Having been urged to leave her room quickly, I started to return to my room.

But really, is it even possible for an arm to be stuck in a water bottle and not be able to get out?

I took it out of the box, rinsed it with water and put my hand in it to test it out. When I did, it seemed to be quite a hazardous size and unexpectedly my arm was fixed in position firmly.

"Rocket Punch! Just kidding."

I became an idiot for a moment and then tried to remove the water bottle from my arm but...

"I-I can't pull it out!?"

Chapter 04: A Day of Disaster and Girl Troubles. A Devil Smile like an Angel

---

"Today I'll be making you cooperate with me, Ayanokouji!!!"

"...what is it first thing in the morning...you're quite lively, Yamauchi..."

Having been woken from the chime to my room being rung, I sighed upon seeing the visitor, Yamauchi.

"I'll be disturbing you!"

He's being quite lively. It's a blessing that Ike and Sudou aren't together with him too but what exactly does he want from me?

"What, were you sleeping? You're being pretty laidback even though summer vacation will be over in a few days." Yamauchi said.

I'm being laidback precisely because there's not many days left though.

"I've decided that today is going to be a special day for me, and with that please let me come in."

Although not quite following the story and still sleepy, I welcomed Yamauchi in from the entrance. Then I prepared a cup of barley tea for him.

"So...do I have something to do with what you're doing on

this special day?"

"I won't let you say you've forgotten, Ayanokouji. That I have the right to know Sakura's contact number!"

He cries that out strongly towards me. His eyes were slightly bloodshot and reflected his seriousness.

"I see....."

In regards to that matter, since I was at fault for all of it, I cannot simply refuse to listen just because it happens to be inconvenient for me.

A while back, on the condition that I would tell him Sakura's contact number, I had Yamauchi act out a role not dissimilar to that of a clown. As a result of that influence, Yamauchi's evaluation from Horikita in particular had gone down.

Of course it would only be right for me to tell him Sakura's contact number, however, since it was something I had done without her consent, I prioritized protecting her and even until now, I have yet to tell Yamauchi of Sakura's contact number.

I certainly need to repay that favor.

"I think it'll be pretty difficult if you've come to hear her contact number...?"

"That's not it. I've given up on that."

Saying that, Yamauchi brought out a white letter he must have been holding in his hands.

"I've put down all my feelings for Sakura in this one sheet!" he said.

"Put down.....you mean this is a love letter?"

"That's right! Inside here I've written about how much I love Sakura! Try reading it!"

Then saying that, he took that letter from before, closed with a seal, and showed it to me.

"Dear Sakura Airi-sama. I have been interested in you since a long time ago, please go out with me."

"It's a rather simple love letter that's too formal from the beginning..."

Towards me who pointed that out, Yamauchi had a prideful expression on his face.

"Just writing long sentences by itself isn't good, I'm telling you."

That might be the case, but with just this much there would be little to no context to the writing, would there? I can also see the person receiving it being troubled. Even more so if the person receiving it is Sakura.

"Why is it in print instead of being handwritten?"

"Yeah, I'm not really proud of this but my handwriting sucks. I used print to make it easier to read. I was sort of worried she might misread the sentence?"

He then scratches the bottom of his nose with his index

finger with a proud expression, but I don't think it's that important.

"And also, these days don't they even use print for your resume?"

"If you really want to convey your feelings to the other person I think a handwritten letter is better. And why did you use such a horror-like font for your text?"

A strange demon exists! It feels like that font that looks like it could be used for a headline is going to be used to curse someone.

"How do I put it, doesn't it have impact? Like an 'I'll be thinking of you forever' kind of feeling."

"I suppose I'll give in unwillingly for now...the problem is the last part here."

A part written for him to show his appeal.

"If you would go out with me, I'm prepared to hand over all my points to you every month. As a tribute!"

"This is too much, no matter what."

"What do you mean? They say cute girls like to be paid tribute to, you know? And besides, I want to date Sakura even if I have to give her all my points, that I like her this much, I think that passion will be conveyed to her." Yamauchi said.

I can't deny that this too is an expression of love, but the way this is it can be taken to mean he's asking her to date him for money.

"This is just fine. I don't care even if she's only after my money I just want to date her.....is it that bad?" Yamauchi asked.

As I nodded in response, Yamauchi, while showing an expression as though he could not comprehend it, did seem to show a slight bit of understanding.

"...I just want to confirm one thing but are you seriously intending on confessing?"

"Yeah. Starting from the second semester I'm going to start my dreamlike school life, I'll be betting it all on this. I've already negotiated with Kikyo-chan to call Sakura out."

In his eyes there was nothing that could be made fun of, and only the figure of Yamauchi who had firmed his resolve remained. After having witnessed something like that, I could not even slight him.

If I have any feelings of respect towards Sakura I should be stopping him, but his method is honest. I should honestly be lending him a hand.

"So.....what should I do? Should I just be checking the contents of the letter?"

"There's that but there's one more important role for you. That is basically, I'd like you to deliver the letter to Sakura."

"What? What did you just say?"

For a moment I thought I had misheard and so asked again.

"Like I said, I want you to deliver the letter in my place. I've been feeling nervous since the morning, the last time I felt this nervous was when I was competing in the final game at the National Sumo Stadium and won. That's why I don't have the confidence to hand it over properly and talk with her."

I wanted to ask exactly what final game at the National Sumo Stadium he had been competing in, the details of his usual lie but that was a weak statement uncharacteristic of the Yamauchi who's always straightforward in regards to love as he seems to be in high tension.

"If you say the contents of the letter are a problem, I'll properly rewrite them. That's why---please!"

Bringing together both his hands, Yamauchi lowered his head and requested that of me.

"And also, I'll let bygones be bygones. No, even if Ayanokouji gets into trouble I'll cooperate with you!"

"...if you're insisting then I don't mind accepting it."

"Really?"

"But no one knows whether it'll be a success or a failure. It all depends on Sakura's feelings. Do you understand that?"

"Yeah. I'm not an idiot too. I know my chances aren't high."

Perhaps he's carrying a large anxiety in him, but he seems to understand that his chances of success aren't even 50%.

In fact, there's a part of Sakura that actively withdraws

from men. Considering that, his chances can almost said to be despair-inducing. But even so this man came with a fighting determination right now to this place.

"...I understand. I'll convey your feelings. Is that fine?"

If that's the case, there's no fair or unfair.

"Ayanokouji.....! You've saved me!"

Grasping my outstretched hand, Yamauchi lowered his head almost as if he were worshipping a god.

If that's decided, then first I'll need to review the contents of the letter. If the person receiving it is to be Sakura, first it needs to be gentler, and written in a way that properly conveys feelings, if not it won't have an effect on her.

Yamauchi prepares his resolve. But really, if it's true this is still too premature. For those two who have not even exchanged their contact numbers, a confession is just a risk.

If he wishes to raise his chances of success, he first needs to firmly attack her. But, Yamauchi's methods too, should not be wrong. Romance is always something that starts spontaneously, and there have been many cases in the world of a romance starting from zero.

"First the start---"

Like Yamauchi, my romance experience is also zero but at least let me consider a statement befitting it.

"Oh, that's right. Please just let me add on one order. The answer to my confession, I want it to be answered behind the

school building."

"Behind the school building? Towards the second gym?"

"Yeah, yeah. There's a rumor you know. If you confess there, things will go well."

It's probably similar to the legendary under-the-tree confession. Rumors seem to waft in from everywhere.

"I see. So it's part of the stage, huh?"

"Naturally it's not just rumors. If it's a student confession, it has to be behind a school building. They call this a rule."

I could not find a connection between a confession and behind a school building but, I can imagine what kind of situation he's thinking of.

* * *

It took around 30 minutes for me to make contact with my target, Sakura.

What feelings would she react with towards Kushida's invitation? That's something only the person in question would know, but she's unlikely to be in a calm state of mind. On the other hand, I was in standby mode at the location promised beforehand awaiting Sakura's arrival.

As Yamauchi said, I cannot afford to keep her waiting, but having me wait in advance for 30 minutes is just too early. The phone I had kept on silent mode in my pocket vibrates.

"Hello?"

[H-how is it? Can you see Sakura yet?]

"Not at all. She probably won't be here until at least around 10 minutes prior, won't she?"

[I-I see, Kuu---I'm getting nervous!]

From a slight distance while glancing towards me, Yamauchi waves his hands. Although he doesn't wish to be seen, he must have been curious from the look of things and came to see for himself.

"Hey Yamauchi, is it really fine to give me the role of handing it over? I really think it would be better if you gave it to her yourself."

[I-it's impossible, I'm telling you. I've had a trauma ever since I was little and whenever I'm under extreme stress my hands tremble.]

I think that a majority of people would likely tremble if placed under extreme stress though.....

"I understand your desire to not mess up but why don't you think it over a little more? Does a love letter delivered indirectly really have value?"

[No but doesn't this happen quite often? A cute girl gets asked out after school but contrary to her expectations, she ends up getting confessed to by an ugly man. That sort of pattern. In that sense, this is the reverse pattern of that. I asked Kushida to keep it a secret that I called her out here. In other words, if she realizes it's Ayanokouji who's waiting for her she'll be disappointed. But if she realizes that it's in fact me who's doing the confession, through comparing the two of

us my evaluation of her will inevitably improve, that sort of thing. That's why Ayanokouji, when you're handing that letter over to her, don't mention my existence. It's better to let her think she's being confessed to by someone like you instead.] Yamauchi told me.

He speaks of his strategy with loquaciousness but doesn't seem to mind that he's been badmouthing me the whole time.

I'm not planning on criticising that goal of his, but it's an unmistakable fact that it's better to consider Sakura's feelings too.

"No matter how much your feelings are conveyed through the letter, a confession from someone she can't even see might be scary for her."

"T-that's..."

There's still time. I might be able to get him to reconsider. A confession, basically, is a one-time event. Even Yamauchi would not want to do it in a way that would leave behind regrets.

"There's still time. I think you should reconsider. That's why you wrote this letter right?"

"That's true but...uuuu---I wonder if I should confess in person....."

At last, even inside Yamauchi, a single conclusion seems to be forming.

"...Ayanokouji-kun?"

Just as I thought I could hear faint footsteps from behind me, a voice like that called out to me.

"Sakura's here! I'll leave the rest to you!"

It seems Yamauchi was trying to drum up the courage, but since Sakura had arrived earlier than expected, he panicked and cut the call.

As for me too, since I had already made contact with Sakura, there was nothing else I could do either. All that's left is to hand over the letter Yamauchi entrusted me with.

"It's a coincidence, right?"

"Ahh, no. You were called out here by Kushida right?"

"Y-Yeah. She said she needed to talk to me about something...she said it was something important."

I looked around, but obviously, there was no one else but me.

"The truth is, I asked Kushida for a favor and had her call you out here."

Strictly speaking, it wasn't me but it can't be helped even if it confuses her here.

"Ayanokouji-kun did? I-I see. That's a relief. Normally I don't have much contact with Kushida-san so I was afraid I had done something to make her angry."

She patted her chest in relief.

It seems that the Sakura that was called out by Kushida no

longer feels uneasy. Towards that Sakura, I decided to confront her with a simple question.

"Even so you're quite early. There's still about 30 minutes until the promised time."

"That's...I was anxious that I needed to get here early."

Still flustered, she explains as such to me.

"But I see, it was Ayanokouji-kun. The one who called me. I'm really relieved."

As she pats her chest after having felt relief from the bottom of her heart, the nervousness she had felt earlier unravelled and her expression returned to its usual calmness.

"But why? If you wanted me for something you could've just directly called me out."

"Ahh, no, it's a bit. There's a bit of a complicated situation going on."

"A complicated situation?"

How do I explain this? In regards to this, I was also slightly troubled.

Biologically speaking, I've already extensively studied the difference between men and women academically but when it comes to applying that knowledge in reality like this, I had not learnt any strategies.

And here the problem isn't only the difference between our sexes but I will also need to factor in Sakura's individual

personality and feelings as well. This is a complex and strange aspect of society that human beings with intellect had constructed.

Time had been passing while I had been considering that. The longer the silence, the more her caution would rise.

"The thing is...I had Kushida call you out because I wanted to hand this over to you."

The letter Yamauchi entrusted me with, I offered it to Sakura.

"This is...?"

"I'd like you to accept it without asking too much. If you read the contents I'm sure you'll understand." I told Sakura.

If the deliverer himself explains it, the meaning behind the letter will be diminished. I handed it over like that.

"O-ok."

I felt something similar to guilt and so I averted my gaze.

On the other hand Sakura kept looking back and forth between me and the letter to try and make sense of the situation.

"L...etter....behind school building....a boy.....".

The Sakura who received the letter, while staring at someplace far away, weakly whispered something to herself.

Woah, but the way I just said it it could be taken to mean I'm the one who wrote that letter.

That is bad.

"I was entrusted with this from a guy who's in hiding. The sender says you'll understand if you read it. He seems to have bad handwriting, but it seems he's given it his all in writing this letter."

I properly followed up to make sure there would be no accidents.

"A, Awawa.....this is...awawawa!?"

Perhaps this is a letter of confession from a boy, such a prediction had already grown inside of Sakura it seems.

She had lost her calmness and her gaze seems to be staring out towards the day after tomorrow.

Even if she opens the letter and reads it here, her reaction would be a problem for me so it's better for me to quickly leave this location.

"And with that I've handed it over. All that's left is for you to properly make your decision. Then if you find it difficult to give me an answer directly, you can send it by chat or through a phone call, that's fine." I told her.

In Sakura's case, there is a possibility that she would be unable to say either 'Yes' or 'No' after all. I should help her with at least that.

"Ko, kokoko, kokoko."

"Are you a chicken?".

"N-no. That's not it. T-this is a l-lov.....".

"Yeah. It's a love letter." I said.

(Note: Love letter = Koibumi)

"Kyuuuu!?".

"Woah."

I quickly moved to support the girl who came dangerously close to falling over backwards.

"Are you ok?"

Just by touching her back with my hand, I could tell her body was burning up. This must have been unexpected. And besides, she may be trying to figure out who the letter came from in her head.

"Umm, umm umm!"

Suddenly opening her eyes, she moved her body with an incredible vigor. After I had confirmed she's now standing on her own feet, I released my hand from her back.

"Horikita.....-san! Do you think she'll be angry!?" Sakura asked.

"Hmm? Horikita?"

There's no reason why she should get angry.

If she happened to see me delivering the letter in place of Yamauchi she would probably exasperatedly sigh while saying something like "You're getting yourself involved in something pointless again. Haa".

At the very least it's not something that would make her angry.

I thought for a moment she mistook me for the one confessing, but when I handed over the letter, I did properly

say "I was entrusted with this from a guy who's in hiding". She shouldn't have misunderstood me.

"U, uwa.....uwa....."

But Sakura's face only got redder and redder and from the nervousness, it seemed as though she was about to lose consciousness. It's just, I don't think this is a reaction from just receiving the letter.

This feels like a situation where the man handing over the confession letter is right in front of her.....

If so, regardless of the confession, it wouldn't be strange if Sakura panics. Even I could cause a panic if it becomes a situation like that. If so, I can also now understand the reason why Horikita's name came out.

"Sakura. Just in case I'll repeat myself.....I was entrusted with that letter by another man, do you get that?"

As I said that again, Sakura's shoulders trembled.

"Ehh---ahh, it's not Ayanokouji-kun....?"

"I said so earlier, right? I was just asked to deliver it."

".....I see. Of course it's like that. There's no way something like that, is possible.....b-b-but, what should I do with this!?"

"There's nothing to do but read it and give your answer."

I tried to leave since I'd only be in the way but I was pulled by the cuffs on my clothes.

"Ehh---! Impossible, impossible! I can't do..."

"Have you never been confessed to before?"

"Never!"

Sakura answers me quickly like that.

It seemed like she'd be confessed to a number of times given that she's this cute. But that's just because I'm looking at the Sakura now, the story might have been different with the Sakura from before.

"This letter.....won't you read it, together with me.....?"

Together...in the first place the contents are written as per my instructions. If Sakura doesn't have the necessary courage to read it alone, it's not like I can't cooperate with her but.....

That sort of scene, Yamauchi probably doesn't want something like that.

"For now won't you at least read the letter alone? That's also the responsibility of me who was entrusted with the letter. It might be a burden for you, but please understand."

"Ok....."

Since Sakura did not seem at all happy about this, I decided to follow up a bit.

"There's also the possibility that it's from someone you like." I told her.

"That possibility no longer exists....."

"Hmm?"

"Ahh, umm! That's, because I don't have anyone I like. I-I'll try reading it!"

Nodding, Sakura slightly adjusts her gaze and lowers her head, and returns towards the dormitory. She'll probably return to her room to read the letter Yamauchi had written.

"H-how did it go!? What's the feeling!? Did she seem happy!?"

Having confirmed from afar that Sakura had returned to the dormitory with the letter in hand, Yamauchi rushed over and asked me that nervously.

I do understand his desire to ask various things, but if that's the case, he should've been the one to hand it over from the start.

"She hasn't read the letter yet. Her judgement will come from now I think."

"J-judgement, don't use such a scary word. I believe it will be absolutely fine!"

"I'll ask just in case but what's your basis for that?"

"That's, judging from her mannerisms when she's talking with me, I guess."

"Mannerisms?"

"How should I put it, she shyly averts her gaze. Isn't it because she's conscious of me that she can't look directly at me?"

No.....I think that's simply because Sakura is bad at dealing with people face-to-face.

"That's not all. Whenever she talks with me, after that she always sort of heavily sighs. Isn't that what you'd call a sigh of love? Doesn't that happen, thinking of someone you love and going "Haa~" and sighing. I can feel an omen like that." Yamauchi said.

I think that's probably, because she's tired after dealing with someone like Yamauchi who talks to her with high tension.....

But even something that obvious, when it comes to a person you like, one would be blinded to such things.

* * *

At midnight, while slightly worried about Sakura's response tomorrow, I made preparations to go to bed.

My phone vibrated once.

[Are you awake?]

A modest, short sentence. It was from Sakura.

I stared at the screen of my phone for a while without touching it, but a continuation of that sentence doesn't seem to be coming. She probably assumed I was asleep and is being considerate.

I opened up the chat screen and marked it as read. And when I did, another brief message was sent.

[Did I wake you.....?]

"Sorry, I had some laundry to wash. It's fine."

I answered with a small lie like that. As I did, perhaps she felt relieved, as next came a slightly longer sentence.

"Tomorrow at 5 o'clock I'll have to meet Yamauchi-kun...can I meet you before that.....?"

That sort of message came in. I could have refused but for Sakura, there's no one else she could rely on.

"Where are you meeting him?"

[The same place behind the school building as yesterday.]

I did know that, but on top of confirming that again I made a promise to meet with Sakura. Since I did not want to trouble Sakura, I decided to meet with her in the same place behind that school building.

Now, time to sleep. Promptly finishing off the remaining chores, I turned off the power and laid down.

And, my phone vibrated again.

[Umm...sorry for bothering you so many times. Is it ok if I call you?]

Anxiety that was transmitted to me through the mail. It's better if I don't just go to sleep and leave Sakura hanging. And when I called her, Sakura answered with a low voice.

"You can't sleep?"

"Yeah.....thinking about tomorrow, I just got nervous.....haaaaa."

It was a depressing sigh.

Her anxiety is also being transmitted through the call. She's probably thinking about an answer to the confession.

"I---I don't know anything about Yamauchi-kun.....and that's a bit scary....."

"I see....."

"Liking someone, or hating someone. I just realized it comes with a huge responsibility."

For Sakura, who has not paid much attention to the distance between her and her surroundings up until now, this event must have been too much of a stimulus. But the extent to which an outsider can interfere and help out is limited.

The one who decides everything will be Sakura, and the one receiving it will be Yamauchi. This pattern alone cannot be broken. That's something even a beginner in romance like myself understands.

I don't have the right to advise Sakura to either reject him or accept him. I can do nothing but quietly listen to what she has to say.

"Yamauchi-kun's done nothing wrong, but I'm just...thinking I don't want it. But I also feel bad for him, who noticed even someone like me....."

I keenly realized that love is definitely something

complicated.

".....when I kept on thinking, I just don't know what I should do....."

That's understandable, even through the phone I could understand how she must have been constantly feeling confused.

"Why me.....I thought. Why do I have to suffer like this, I end up thinking."

Rather than being happy, on the contrary, it seems as though she dislikes or at least is troubled by it.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you, umm.....ahh, you might hear something unnecessary but...."

"Please ask me anything. If it's something I can answer I will answer."

"Umm.....right now, are you dating someone.....like that?"

For some reason she asked me that in a formal tone.

"No, absolutely not. Right now and of course, up until now too."

"R-really!?"

"If you sound so happy it makes me feel like you're being sarcastic."

It does unusually hurt when she's so happy about a man who's never dated before.

"Waahh....no, I don't mean to make fun of you! I was just happy, because you're just like me."

"I'm just kidding." I told her.

"Mou.....!"

It was just a light joke, but it seems to have unravelled Sakura's hardened heart.

"Then umm, have you ever been confessed to by someone, or confessed to someone, something like that?"

She seems to be stepping it up quite a bit. But I have nothing to hide so it's fine though.

"Same as you. Confession experience 0."

But in Sakura's case, this would be her commemorative first time though.

"So that's how it is!"

She sounded happy again. And just like that, Sakura and I talked aimlessly about random topics excitedly for a while.

After a while, I felt Sakura getting drowsy and ended the call. I hope she slowly falls asleep just like that. Thinking that, I too decided to sleep.

* * *

The promised time was 4 o'clock in the evening, however 10 minutes prior to that Sakura was already waiting with a complicated expression on her face.

She's probably thinking a lot of things over in her head, her expression changes with each second. A crestfallen face, a nervous face, a worried face. I wonder what she's thinking of deep in her heart.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

"Ahh."

As I called out to her, Sakura slowly raised her head and hesitantly approached me.

It would be best if, by calling out to her, I could reduce Sakura's burden even a little.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun...for coming here."

"It's nothing for you to thank me over. So, what's the matter?"

"Yeah.....that's, about the letter you handed over to me yesterday....."

"Did something happen?"

To have called me, who's met with Yamauchi, out means there's something she's thought about. But perhaps there's still some resistance left in her towards talking about it since the words don't seem to be coming out of her smoothly.

"Don't be reserved---"

I tried to cut in by saying that but just as I did, I could see the figures of several students coming towards the hallway. Judging from their jersey-wearing appearances, it must be

related to club activities.

"Sorry but shall we walk around a bit?"

"Ehh? Ahh, ok."

It wouldn't be any good right now to be seen by someone.

We walked towards the back of the school building where trees grew to avoid the eyes of people. A place like that where normally people don't visit would carry very little risk of being seen by the eyes of people but this place seems to be carefully maintained.

It would be troublesome if we ran into Yamauchi if he mistakenly happened to arrive at the meeting spot early, I'd better finish it up quickly.

As I thought that, Sakura mysteriously enough bent her neck, spreading out her right hand as she looked towards the sky.

"What's wrong---?"

Almost as soon as I asked that question, I realized the reason behind Sakura's mysterious actions.

"Rain, it's raining."

I had thought the skies were clear, but all of a sudden, rain began to pour down heavily.

It was, of course, a temporary thing but the downpour was far more intense than I had expected and soaked our clothes.

"Damn, let's go back to the hallway for now!"

Grabbing a nodding Sakura, I headed back down the path we came from.

The time we were exposed to the rain was less than a minute but since it had rained heavily it seems Sakura's clothes were completely soaked. I could see even her hair was drenched.

"Unlucky...are you ok, Sakura?"

"I-I'm fine, what about Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I'm fine too."

I sighed slightly while watching the rain which only intensified. What terrible timing the rain had.

"Please use this if you'd like."

Hesitantly, Sakura hands over a handkerchief to me. I remembered that handkerchief. It's the same one lent back during the uninhabited island.

"I'm fine, please use it yourself. You'll catch a cold." I told her.

I can't wipe myself off first, not when a girl's drenched in front of me. But even so, Sakura stood on her tiptoes and used that handkerchief to wipe raindrops off my soaked hair. Carried by the smell of the rain, I could smell Sakura's scent tickling my nose.

"I'm surprisingly sturdy."

She said as she wiped the raindrops off my hair, and then

from my neck.

"....."

I snuck a glance at Sakura, who was standing by my side silently. I could somehow understand what Yamauchi is aiming for now, I felt like.

Right now it's in the middle of summer vacation and we were both in our casual clothes, but if this were her school uniform it might have been an excellent situation. The rain falling accident did happen, but that too could be considered an event.

A suddenly falling rain. The two of us panicking and running towards a roof to hide under. And without stopping...we'd talk until slowly but surely we run out of topics. And our line of sight would intertwine, and we could hear each other exhaling. It's a sort of scene men fantasize about.

But for some reason, inside my head, for a moment I could see that. What Yamauchi desired. This may be a feeling analogous to that.

"I wonder if it'll stop soon...?"

"I looked it up on my phone just now but, it seems to be just a passing shower. If we wait a bit it should stop."

"I see..."

"Ahh, sorry. Even though you had something important to do after this I ended up letting you get wet."

"No, it's fine. It's not important at all." Sakura replied.

Sakura said it was not important. In other words that means---

"I...wonder what I should do....."

"There's nothing to do but answer according to what you feel. Accept, reject. Or start as friends first."

The exact steps depend on the individual. I'm not going to say anything unnecessary.

"Of course you can always hold off on your answer, and if it's too embarrassing, I can give it to Yamauchi instead."

Yamauchi surely won't desire something like that but if Sakura wishes for something like that, I would have no choice but to fulfill her wish.

".....no, I'll tell him myself....I probably have to tell it."

"I suppose you're right. It's also for Yamauchi's sake."

"Yeah. I understand.....I'll reject him."

Before giving Yamauchi his answer, she let me hear her answer first.

"I see."

I did understand that there was nearly a 100% chance it would be like that from the flow of the conversation until now. But it's important that Sakura says that from her own mouth.

"Ahh---, uuu---, umm. I don't think I have the right to deny someone else's feelings. I think that might be too presumptuous of me...but...."

For some reason, towards giving a rejection, Sakura seems to be assaulted by strong feelings of guilt.

"There's nothing for you to be apologetic about. Basically, it's just a one-sided feeling from the side of the confessor. Accepting it is only in the case that you also happen to like them, if not it's not a strange thing to reject them. There's no such thing as not having a right like that." I told her.

Feeling like I didn't want her to misunderstand that alone, I strongly told her that. I think the rain should be stopping soon, but there's no telling when Yamauchi would show up.

"It's better if I went back, right? I'll head back for now."

The rain's still slightly intense, but I made a step to head back.

"N-No! If Ayanokouji-kun's no longer here, I won't be able to speak anymore, that's why...please..."

She grabs me by my sleeve. And gripped it tightly.

"Please...don't leave me alone."

"If that's your wish."

Answering shortly like that, I decided to stay under the roof once more. Sakura's been a help to me in various ways, after all.

Then, about 15 minutes later, Yamauchi arrived. But even so, that was rather fast of him. His expression was more rigid that I had ever seen him before.

"W-why are you here, Ayanokouji?"

"Sorry. Sakura said she didn't have the courage to meet with only the two of you so I was asked to be here. Please don't mind me."

Saying that surely won't make him feel comfortable, but Yamauchi has no other choice but to switch over to this.

For a moment I thought something was suspicious, but Yamauchi was desperately attempting to focus on the Sakura in front of his eyes.

"S-sorry for keeping you waiting, you read my letter."

"Yes.....umm.....please let me ask just one thing."

"You can ask me anything....."

Sakura tightens her grip on her skirt and squeezes out a voice from inside her throat.

"W-why do you like...me? There are plenty of people, cuter than me....."

"I prefer Sakura!".

Just like that, he screamed it out. Sakura's shoulders jumped as she flinched.

"S-sorry. I didn't mean to use a loud voice.....s-so what's your answer?"

A clumsy answer to a clumsy confession.

Since I happened to be listening in on someone else's affairs, I ended up thinking they should say this or that to make it better.

But for the man himself, he's nervous enough that his heart is about to leap out of his mouth so he's not in much of a position to think properly. No matter what, he is unable to choose the best

option.

"I.....I'm sorry!"

Standing in front of Yamauchi with slightly reddish eyes, Sakura bowed deeply while saying that.

At that moment, the light of the last hope smoldering within Yamauchi crumbled and scattered away.

"I-I, towards your feelings, umm, can't answer them."

How much courage must Sakura have summoned up to be able to twist that word.

For the first time, I saw in front of my, witnessed strangely close up, a form of 'romance'.

Surely Yamauchi, too, did not wish to be dumped in a place with a third-party present. Even though it could not be helped, there's no mistaking that I made him feel complicated emotions.

"I see....."

Having understood, Yamauchi seems to be desperately attempting to swallow the situation.

Just like Sakura, his voice seemed to be trembling slightly, but I could not bring myself to laugh at that figure.

"Thank you, Sakura. For deliberately, coming all the way out here."

"G-Goodbye……!"

No longer able to withstand the heavy atmosphere of this place, Sakura deeply bowed her head before Yamauchi and scurried away.

"Ahh……."

The arm Yamauchi powerlessly extended did not reach Sakura. I could not do anything but stand by silently as the first romance I had seen concluded.

Yamauchi tried to resist his disappointment for a while but eventually he raised his head and looked at me.

I wonder if he will direct jeers towards me who had been intruding on the place of his confession like a disturbing insect.

Or perhaps he'll let out a burst of anger? In any case, he seems to be preparing to let out his discontent and unhappiness.

But---

"Hah, this is embarrassing. To be dumped in front of a

friend. My face's just about to burst into flames."

And without blaming me at all, he said that. On his face, the shock from having been dumped was oozing out, but that wasn't all.

"Yeah, how do I put it, umm.....I feel relieved, I suppose."

Yamauchi, whose disposition now seemed sunny somehow, said that while looking straight at me.

"How do I put it, I was an idiot. I was just troubling Sakura, I just finally realized that. To not hurt me, who she didn't even like, she tried to choose her words. I'm full of guilt. I'm free to like her but I've learned that conveying your feelings also carries a responsibility to it." Yamauchi said.

As I glanced at Yamauchi's shoulder, I saw that his clothes were also wet. In other words, he's been standing outside way before the promised time even came. Perhaps he had been nearby worrying the whole time while thinking about the confession.

"You're not as depressed as I expected." I said.

"I, a shock is a shock, but it's not that bad. Sakura is cute and I do want her as my girlfriend. I did think that but I also thought differently. Just looking at her face or her body, those were just shallow actions I took. How do I put it, I didn't really like her from the bottom of my heart. Probably, if I had really liked her, if I were rejected at that moment I would feel more shock, more suffering, more sadness and more frustration I think." he said.

I dared say nothing in response. I silently listened to all the

words that Yamauchi had to spit out.

"That's why---today I'm graduating from this random love of mine. I'll find a girl I can really come to like, I'll start with that." Yamauchi said.

It seems from this rejection, Yamauchi has become a better man.

"I'm grateful to you, Ayanokouji. I apologize for getting you involved in something strange like this."

"Don't worry about it. Because we're.....friends."

"Here, I'll lend this to you. You did say you wanted to borrow a phone, right?"

"Are you sure? Didn't you say it was conditional on the success of the confession?" I asked.

"This is special. But you better give it back right away."

Saying that, Yamauchi strided forward in the same direction Sakura ran off in.

And when I realized it, a ray of sunlight had begun to pierce through the openings in the rainclouds.

Chapter 05: Classes Gathering

"It’s so hot today..."

I don’t know how many times I have uttered these words this summer.

Nevertheless, it can’t be helped that hot things will stay that way. Even though it gets even hotter just by saying it, we still need to. Just complaining within yourself will endlessly increase the pent-up stress.

The only ones rejoicing the intense heat would probably be the cicadas. Speaking of which, this time I ended up being dragged into an unusually rare event. Though I use the word event, just knowing the details of it may stir up a strong sense of antagonism in male students, probably.

However, there is also trouble mixed in as well. Well, let’s start from the beginning.

A little distance from the dorm, there was a road lined with trees on both sides leading up to the school. If you went off-road, you could reach a rest area. Right now, I was standing there.

There was several benches and vending machines set up. The view from this place was also good. No wonder there was a never-ending flow of students here during early spring. This was a perfect place for a little break or some idle talk.

However, right now it was deserted, with nobody in sight. It’s could say it’s due to the heat. It was the rare off-season for

students. That is also why it’s the most suitable place to hold a secret meeting.

"Kept you waiting."

Sitting at the bench, the person I was waiting for was walking from the direction of the dorm. Blocking out the harsh sun with her hand, she was looking up at the sky.

"So hot..."

Leaking out the same impression I have, the Class D student, Karuizawa Kei sat down next to me.

Her long ponytail shook. Her clothing were an unusually casual jeans and a simple shirt. Nevertheless, it didn’t feel shoddy at all even for a weekend.

From what I could see, they were chosen to match her so she looked really nice in them. No matter how hot it was, style was still number one for girls so it must be hard.

"Sorry for taking up your time with this sudden call."

"You sarcastic? I have used up too many points having fun during summer vacation already so I‘ve only been in my room lately for your info."

"Do you have plans for tomorrow?"

"You can’t do anything without money after all. Probably just sleeping?"

Her summer must have been a really self-indulgent one.

"You should get a lot of points next month right, there is

also the results from that exam."

During the exam which took place on that boat, Karuizawa, who was chosen as VIP, collaborated with me and managed to hide her identity until the end. She should be getting 500.000 points as a reward at the start of September for that.

"Well sure. That's why I've bought all the clothing and the accessories I wanted. But, is it okay just spending all the points like that? Isn't better to save some?"

"You have enough self-control then?"

I asked a bit mischievously. She puffed up her cheeks then glared at me.

"That is... not easy. Whenever I end up spending them, they last less that one week I guess."

Karuizawa raised her hands, counting down the things she wanted with her fingers. All her fingers were bent down in no time at all. How many things did she wish for again?

"It's not that I'm not thinking at all you know. Even I know how precious the private points are. The school system is kinda weird right. You receive like exaggeratedly many points during the special exams. The others are also perplexed about it."

I see, it seems the suspicion has finally spread among the regular students. If you receive large amounts of money, of course you will be wary.

Asking themselves why the school would do this. Then they will understand. That these points are not only used to fulfil

one’s private desires or benefits.

"Yeah, suddenly giving out 1-2 million points worth of money."

"That’s it, is it fine handing over so much money to high schoolers? That’s definitely not normal."

Most of the points will probably be necessary to "survive" at this school. Having realised this, Karuizawa was hesitating on whether it was fine to spend them from now on.

This is just an example but if you were in a situation where you would be expelled, there may be an implied chance that one could use those private points to nullify it. Following this, having a few million points as insurance couldn’t be underestimated.

"There’s no use thinking too much over this. Thinking too far ahead and forgetting to satisfy one’s desires is also bad. It’s enough if you save 10-20% of your monthly points."

It was important to maintain a balance between desire and moderation else you will break. Especially for Karuizawa who had been spending her points freely until now. Sealing her desires so suddenly was bad, I judged.

There is also the fact that if her daily life suddenly changed, her surroundings may also be affected. If a girl who had been scattering money started living in frugality, her class may get suspicious. She may have a connection with me but it’s still far too early to let others know.

"Well then, there is one thing I want to request of you."

"... You don’t have an apology for someone you called out on this hot day?"

"Is this fine?"

I handed her a plastic bottle with tea that I just bought, but still yet had to drink. She hesitated a little, but took it reluctantly in the end.

"It’s lukewarm though..."

"Well, we have this weather to thank for that."

It seems the most affected areas already had recorded temperatures over 40 degrees. I’m getting sweaty just from hearing the digits. Thirsty, the displeased Karuizawa opened the bottle.

"Ugh, this one is a loser."

"A loser? I’m sure teas don’t include lotteries with it?"

"That joke’s no fun you know? I meant how hard it’s to open."

I see... That was certainly not a fun misunderstanding.

Stretching out my hands, I took the bottle and twisted the cap a bit, then handed it back to her.

"Thanks."

After that incident on the boat, the distance between me and Karuizawa had been shortened. Otherwise, this was a conversation unheard of.

The events leading up to this had surely made her discontent and distrustful towards me, but she didn't show much of it. She was familiar with controlling herself. That meant she was doing whatever she could to protect herself no matter what and adapting to her environment.

"Tomorrow is the last day of summer vacation. A friend of mine wanted to create some summer memories so I was invited."

"What do you mean by summer memories? This school doesn't have fireworks, festivals or anything right?"

"They should have a pool at least. The swimming club usually has the privilege to use it, but that has been lifted from today on you know?"

It was a pool even larger than the one being used during school lessons. For the last three days of the summer vacation, it was transformed to a community pool that everyone could use.

After the first day where a crowd of students rushed for the pool, entry was being regulated. During these three days, you could only enter only once. The first two days were over, crowded even today.

"Ah, now that you mention it. But I'm not interested in swimming though."

Karuizawa had been continually feigning illness during swimming lessons. Though it may be a school using a point based system making skipping classes hard, they couldn't look into the health issues of the student, especially the ambiguous issues of girls.

Thus the girls were refusing lessons constantly, except for Karuizawa who was always absent. Their reasons for not swimming were varied. Feeling ill, not wanting others to know that one aren't able to swim, hating swimming, not wanting to show skin to the opposite sex, bad style etc. Most of them were using these kind of excuses.

However, for Karuizawa, the reason differed.

Thinking of this problem, she was facing the other way drinking her tea. She had been cruelly bullied by students from the other class earlier receiving a bruise on her side. The bruise still hurt from time to time. If seen, she would surely be getting a lot of attention.

"Do you like swimming itself?"

"Hmm-... I don't hate it I think. I haven't swum for years so I may have forgotten how to."

She vaguely responded. But I could see that this wasn't her true feelings.

"So, you guys want to create some memories at the pool? Just aiming for some erotism?"

I can't deny that. No, that is actually the whole reason I think.

"So, what does that have to do with me?"

"Before that— let me ask you a question. Does the school really not know about you being bullied?"

"What?"

The, up until now, unusually modest Karuizawa showed a dubious face.

Facing me, she started glaring at me. I stared back in return.

"You know that I'm not very fond of that topic right?"

"I'm not bringing it up without any reasons. I am asking because it concerns our next topic."

"But..."

This must be a heavy topic for her. It won't be easy making her understand, but before I had a chance to convince her, she seemed to have accepted it.

"Alright, I'll trust what you have to say. Besides, you must have some reasons after all."

She seemed to have done her best, digesting the antagonism.

"The truth behind me being bullied. If I have to choose between them knowing or not, I don't think they do. They may know about my absence or the many breaks during middle school, but they might only see that as me being sick or skipping classes? Ah, and rather than bullying, they may rather believe it was due to me being dumb. So that's maybe why I was put in Class D."

An answer filled with self-reproach. Her reason for being in Class D should be something like that, I presumed. The effect of a bad impression due to her absences and low academics.

Her arrogant attitude in high school was because she wanted to break off from the bullying. I don't think being bullied is the reason for her being in Class D.

"Though the school may investigate the bullying, they won't find anything I guess."

"Even you should know that the world is stupendously rotting, right?"

"That's right..."

"I have indeed been bullied and suffered for many years. I have asked for help from my teachers and classmates. But it has only resulted in more suffering for my part.... There was nobody helping me from the crushing reality. Far from it, the bullying grew worse."

The bullying was deeply rooted. It has a strong tendency to fall into a vicious cycle. Lots of people watch the news, feel bad and keenly realise that bullying doesn't have an easy solution. Even if a wave is pulling back, another bigger wave will come, assaulting the victim yet again.

"No matter how worn out I was, the school wouldn't so easily acknowledge the bullying so they didn't even try to help. At best, they lightly warned the bullies. So the bullying grew even worse, you know?"

It was a vexing topic alright.

Why did you tattle to the school, what are you scheming, they will say and severely punish her. Even if the school acknowledges the bullying, typically, in most cases, it will be dealt with in secret.

The school doesn’t want a bad reputation for having a bullying problem. There were cases in which some stubborn schools didn’t acknowledge that fact even after the bullied victims left behind their suicide note and ended their lives.

But what’s even harder is that there are no salvation even after death.

People will mock them, laugh at them and even spread tales about them as if it was a heroic saga on social networks. It was the fearful era in which you continued to be bullied even after death.

"My good classmates replied that they didn’t know about the bullying, the school, the bullies or me. This was their forced answer. No matter how unjust the reality was."

That’s it, she ended as if speaking about someone else. For Karuizawa Kei, this was a past she couldn’t change, and a past she would never change.

In fact, this school had probably investigated her thoroughly, only concluding that she was frivolous, tardy and an airhead. If not only her surroundings, but also the school matched their stories, it would never come forth. If true, the truth may never prevail over the lies.

"But still I’m thankful. Towards the ones who bullied me and the school which hide that fact."

It wouldn’t be strange for her to think about her cruel past and cry, but she looked to the future and continued.

"Everyone here doesn’t know who I am. That is why I was able to find a new me. That would probably not have

happened if they had knew."

Overturning her bad situation by herself by obtaining the popular Hirata.

"Karuizawa, I honestly want to praise you, but there is something else I need to tell you first. Assisting in bullying others is now forbidden."

"Ha? You say I'm bullying someone?"

"Being headstrong is good and all, but haven't you been targeting Sakura lately? It's obvious that she isn't the kind of girl who would bully you. Even though you are doing it to prevent becoming a victim yourself, don't join them."

I reminded her with a warning. No matter what past she has, there are things she can and cannot approve of doing.

"Sakura-san heh? You want to help her because she is so attached to you?"

"Do I need a reason? You should know rather well how it is to be on the victim's side."

"As for me, this position is my lifeline. It's not something I can carelessly throw away. I feel bad for Sakura-san, but the weak exist because the strong do. Especially for those pretending like me."

If I'm going to get bullied, I'll bully first. If there was something I could read from her resolution, this was it.

"It's for her sake. She has been helping me a lot after all."

"...Hmm. You sure admitted it quickly."

Dissatisfaction or discontent could’t be seen in her eyes. Only wariness.

"My words may not sound very convincing for you but... alright. I will be careful from now on. Is that all?"

"I’m glad you understand. Besides, you already have Hirata to secure your position. It won’t be threatened for now."

"It’s true that I may have been overdoing it."

As long as she can see herself objectively, there’s no need to worry.

"But if my position happen to be in danger..."

"Then I will back you up. If necessary, I will bring Hirata and Chabashira-sensei to your side and eliminate your enemies. This is a promise."

"Hmm... then it’s a deal."

She was never the kind of person who would resort to violence or intimidation in the first place. She may say so, but to me it seemed like she acted the role to protect herself.

The victim of bullying would usually have a hard time socialising, but she seems to have overcome the pain, the owner of a strong mind. This I could be certain of since she wouldn’t yield to my threats that time.

"I wonder why...?"

"What is it?"

"No, you see. I don’t like to dig up my past. Letting others know is also a no. Still, I ended up telling you, and it was so easy that it surprised me."

It seems that was a mystery to her. Of course that also applies to me.

"Can I ask you something? Is this how you really are?"

Karuizawa asked cautiously, being the only one in our class who have seen my two sides.

But what she was asking for was surprisingly hard for me to answer. I crossed my arms wondering how to respond.

"I am always like this, I suppose."

"You are totally different!"

That’s true, but it isn’t strictly false either. It’s a bit different from faking a personality.

"Just for reference, what is the difference between how I am usually and how I am now?"

"You are usually kinda dark and gloomy and a person who doesn't speak. But now you are very assertive and direct. You really stand out since they contrast each other. The way you speak is also different. What’s with you anyway?"

"Let’s see... isn’t that just like how people are different when there are people around?"

If I had to choose the most fitting answer, this would be it. But it still felt like it missed something.

I, as a human being, had frankly "just been born". My personality began to form only since my enrollment in the school, it was still not solid. It takes time to solidify itself, especially regarding how to connect with people. I still don’t know the right way to express myself.

"Anyway, I plan on being myself as always."

"I am asking because you don’t look like you are."

Karuizawa narrowed her eyes, pouting her lips looking dissatisfied.

"Anyway, back to the topic. You can watch me from now on and see for yourself what kind of human I am."

"It feels like you are evading the question but yeah... What’s up with the pool then?"

"Tomorrow, the four of us, me, Ike, Yamauchi, Sudou and Horikita, Sakura, Kushida are planning on going out."

"A really strange combination. I can’t image Horikita and Sakura joining. Well, you are joining so there must be something, but I still can’t see how. They are going to be ogled at right? My condolences."

The girls would usually never come even if invited, that was clear as a day. That was indeed a troublesome factor. It’s no wonder she felt something was amiss.

"Anyway, I want you to come to the pool and join them."

"Ha!? Are you serious!?"

She didn't have any connections with that group... no, joining them would be too unnatural due to her bad relationship with them.

"You can just change at the dorm and wear something over. It will be a bit unpleasant, but you can return back the same way."

"No no, that’s not the problem, that’s really unpleasant you know?"

"I can sympathise with you, but do you really have the right to refuse?"

"Wow, you are the worst—"

"No matter what you say, it’s already set in stone. I will have you move as instructed."

After finishing what I had to say, I took a handwritten note and handed it to her forcibly.

"I’m showing some consideration alright."

"Showing some consideration, what’s up with that? I will be restricted for the whole day won’t I? On the last day of summer too!"

"Didn’t you say you were going to sleep in your room earlier? Can’t see any problems here."

She herself said it so it can’t be denied.

"I want you to join, but I didn’t ask you to accompany them."

Not understanding the meaning of what I said, she read the written note closely.

"What is the difference...?"

"That is—"

I couldn't explain in details why I summoned her in the first place.

Karuizawa, having listened to me until the very end seemed to have gotten a headache, cradling her head in her hands.

"What is it? You having a headache?"

"Of course it hurts, why, it’s them after— no, nothing, it’s meaningless even if I ask."

She seemed to imply that it would be pointless to ask.

"Why don’t you ask Horikita-san? Aren’t you close?"

"I can’t ask her. She doesn’t know that I am working in the background, you see."

"Eh? Why?"

That’s a natural response.

Though clearing that up is a bit hard. Clearly, the right answer is to evade then mislead. However, towards her, I decided to take our relationship one step further.

"The fact that I came in contact with you on the boat is caused by me acting independently the whole time, including

now. The reason I cannot tell her is because I cannot fully trust her yet."

I told her everything clearly with no falsehood.

"Eh? You don't trust her despite spending so much time together? That's weird."

"That is because she is a splendid cover for me. She is standing out on her own."

"So you are only using her?"

"That’s not the right term, but it may be appropriate for this situation."

"Hmm? I don’t understand it but... Can you stop with those subtle nuances of yours?"

She objected while smiling, showing her white teeth.

"...But the plans have been successful until now right. I always thought Horikita-san was the one coming up with and executing them. Who the heck are you anyway?"

I assume, to her, my existence was a mystery.

"Oh well. being more trusted than Horikita is not a bad thing."

Indeed. That is not exactly wrong. Karuizawa has something that Horikita lacks, which is why I can tell her but not the latter.

"I just have to follow your orders, right?"

"Good. Now that this problem is settled, for this event, can I ask you to accompany me for a bit? We need to set up a few things beforehand."

"I don’t have any veto power, right? Roger."

Implying that she wanted it done as fast as possible, she stood up and dusted off dirt from her rear.

I don’t want to waste any time either so we headed for the pool facilities together.

* * *

On the night before my meeting with Karuizawa.

While enjoying the last bit of summer vacation in my own room, Ike, representing the three idiots, started a group chat like usual.

[You want our summer vacation, our youth, to end like this?]

On one side it was deep, on the other side it was made without any thoughts put into it. Ike then continued before any of us could reply.

[You want our important summer vacation, one year of our youth, to end this way?]

Once more, but the phrasing was different.

[No, not at all!]

As if echoing this statement, Yamauchi showed his approval. Having experienced an unrequited love, a new start

was crucial for him.

[Me too, give me my youth back!]

Joining their chorus was Sudou. Even though the basketball club was going well for him, he also wanted to experience love.

[Then you stand up! Youth won't come to those who wait!]

Wanting it is fine with me, but how are you going to get it?

[You have any ideas?]

He was probably waiting for someone to ask. Right after, a long message arrived.

[Of course I do! The pool is open to everyone for a limited time now, eh? We are going to invite those gorgeous girls and swim! There is my Kikyou right? And Haruki's Sakura? And also Sudou's Horikita!"]

Digging up the wound of Yamauchi, Ike mentioned the names of some girls from our class.

[That may be so. If Suzune is going I'm going, but do you really think she will?]

[Leave that to Ayanokouji-sensei! Right?]

As if! Though I can't say that so easily.

[You will do something right? You ARE my friend, right?]

The sentence had no stamps, but a threat instead, signed Sudou. It was only during these times that they used the word

"friends". So convenient.

[Guess I can try. Don’t expect too much alright.]

After replying, I suspended the chat and tried calling Horikita. The reason I answered his pleas were that some parts of me also wanted to invite her. Since her reputation in class has begun to rise, I can expect great results from this.

"What do you want?"

"Can’t I call without a reason?"

"I’m hanging up?"

"Wait wait, I do have something! Truth is, some friends talked about going to the pool tomorrow. They then told me to call you since you have been reading, holing up in your own room everyday."

"Your friends? You mean that 3-man idiot group? I can’t stomach joining them though."

What a nostalgic name...

"I’m declining."

"Would you have come if it was only the two of us?"

"It would be the same."

Of course it would—.

But this time, I had some other means.

"Thermos."

I felt her attitude and aura change from across the telephone line from hearing this simple word.

"The word thermos has been on my mind lately, you know."

"... What do you mean?"

It would have been fine if she only did as told, but she feigned complete ignorance.

"Getting a hand stuck in a thermos, or something, ring a bell?"

"Your personality is seeping through your unpleasant way of speaking."

Realising what I tried to tell her, she was more discontent than usual.

"I would be happier if you were more honest."

"So where and at what time tomorrow?"

Horikita has things she had to protect. I assume she must not let anyone know of that thermos incident. For this reason, she was even willing to go to the pool.

"Half past eight in the morning by the lobby. We are breaking up by the evening."

"Understood. But I won't forgive you the next time you use that again."

"O-okay."

I don’t have any intentions of using it against her the second nor the third time. Rather than using it to blackmail her, it was like saying thanks for my help during the thermos incident. I believe she also understood that.

[I invited her.]

[Good work Ayanokouji! You avoided the German Suplex on the concrete!]

... It seems like my life was in danger.

[Invite her for me Ayanokouji! I beg you!]

He should have been rejected yesterday, but he still sent that text message. Right after, a private message from Yamauchi arrived.

[I have to cover up my rejection! Help me!]

Is what his other side conveyed through the sorrowful message. It seems he wants to be seen as still being in love with Sakura. Of course, if she joined, the boys would be undoubtedly excited. But she wasn’t a girl who would join that easily.

She was sincere, but she didn’t join Karuizawa’s groups during swimming lessons. Her breasts, larger than the others, stole the attention from the same, if not even more from those of the other sex.

Also, it must be difficult going together with a guy she recently rejected. Leaving aside whether she wanted to go or not, I could at least call her.

* * *

In the blink of an eye, the promised day came.

The start of the last event of the summer vacation. The promised time being 8:30. As I descended down to the lobby, most of the members have already gathered.

"You barely made it, huh."

"There's still about.....10 seconds until the promised time."

"The elevator was in a state of congestion and that's why you were late, right?"

Even though I was not late, I was probed thoroughly like that by Horikita.

It's probably something like a reaction to having been invited forcibly. On top of that, she probably feels that the atmosphere of this place is a troublesome one. It can't be helped because with Kushida and Sakura, Ike and Yamauchi, there's barely anyone for her to talk to.

"G-Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Good morning, Sakura."

While slightly seeming scared, Sakura peeks at me while greeting me.

Towards that Sakura, Yamauchi doesn't seem to be paying any attention but it seems he's worried about her unconsciously. Sakura too, feels somewhat uneasy somewhere.

I'll take note of this for reference, but confessions don't only lead to happy things. Troublesome things also come along with it afterwards.

"Where's Sudou?"

"Since it's him we're talking about he probably overslept." Horikita said.

Although the time for gathering had come and gone, there were no signs of Sudou showing up. Since he was working hard on his club activities up until yesterday, he must probably be exhausted.

Since no one made an attempt to contact Sudou, I made the move.

"It's not working, the call's not going through."

I tried calling him, but even as the phone continues to ring, I couldn't even reach the answering machine. I ended the call and informed my surroundings of that.

"What's that guy Sudou doing? It's already 8:30! If he doesn't hurry, we won't be the first ones!"

The irritated Ike, while fidgeting, stared at the elevator. But it showed no signs of moving.

"O-ok, I'll go wake him up."

Yamauchi, who was feeling uncomfortable from the awkward silence between him and Sakura, said that as he got onto the elevator.

At that very moment, I could feel an invisible heavy atmosphere fade away.

"Did something happen with him?"

It seems Horikita has also noticed the change in Yamauchi and asked me that in a loud voice. I scrambled my head for an answer on how to reply to that.

"Various things happened."

In the end, I stopped talking. Both Yamauchi and Sakura wouldn't be happy if this story was to spread.

"Hmmm---? If it isn't... Horikita-san and the others, good morning---"

As we were in the lobby awaiting Sudou, Ichinose and three of her female friends came down.

Bath towels could be seen peeking out from the unfamiliar, colorful plastic bags they held in their hands.

"Could it be you guys are also heading to the pool?"

"That's the case indeed."

The last thing to eyeball at the very end of summer vacation is to go and play at the pool. Even if our intentions overlapped, it's nothing strange.

"Since we're all here, let's all play together. How about that?"

"Of course you're welcome to join!!!"

Ike, almost as if he's flying, jumped up from the sofa and welcomed her.

This time around, it seems Horikita has no intentions of saying anything in particular as she didn't say a word.

"It's just, sorry. One of us overslept and we're waiting for him to come down. One of our friends is fetching him right now."

"Roooooger." Ichinose replied.

* * *

Opening his mouth wide open like a crocodile, Sudou scratches his bed head hair.

"Sorry. I overslept. Looks like the exhaustion from club activities piled up."

"Don't tell me that."

Sudou was apologizing for oversleeping to Horikita, who was next to him but she seems to be treating him like something troublesome. There were no signs that the distance between those two had shortened.

On the other hand, the Ichinose group who had jumped in to participate as well were talking with Kushida at the center of it.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun."

Horikita called out to me, who was flanking Sudou from the other side. Sudou glanced at me with a bored expression

on his face.

"Don't you think this situation is somewhat strange?"

"What is?"

"The Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun I know would be pushing their luck more than anyone else at a time like this, wouldn't they?"

In response to that sharp statement, Sudou also went rigid for a moment. Since she was right beside him, Horikita did not overlook that figure.

"Did you recall something, Sudou-kun?"

"Nothing in particular....."

Sudou attempted to deceive her like that, but rather than losing her distrust, it only made Horikita more vigilant.

Ike and Yamauchi were walking together both with stiff expressions while rubbing shoulders with each other.

"I can't help but think that they have some suspicious goal though....." Horikita said.

Besides....as if saying that, Horikita focused too on the bag that Ike was holding.

"Even though they should have nothing besides towels and swimsuits with them. It seems like the bag's rather heavy."

It looked like the bag that Ike was holding held more weight than those of any of the other men, including me.

"Really? It doesn't really look like that to me....."

"It doesn't look like that? After looking at that state?"

Horikita's suspicions have a basis after seeing the bag swaying and almost stretching out his elbows in the process.

"Isn't it because he just wants to frolic about after getting to the pool? And he's just carrying the items he needs for that."

I said that to back up Sudou's claim. Sudou quickly got onto that ark of salvation.

"Y-Yeah, I think that's it."

"I see.....indeed that might just be it."

Through daily observations, it's a known fact that the 3 Idiots obsess over girls. It can't be helped even if she feels apprehension towards those three who are being uncharacteristically obedient.

But there was a deep reason behind this.

Right now, those three are being assaulted by extreme feelings of nervousness. This is not because of the fact that they are being surrounded by beautiful girls right now, nor is it because they will be seeing those girls in their swimsuits very soon.

I should change the subject here to keep up the deception.

"Sudou."

"W-What?"

"The results of your club activities, should I put it that way, but did you receive any new income of points?"

"Huh? Y-Yeah, because of my contribution in the tournament, I got a little. Even so, it's just about 3000 points." Sudou said.

It's nothing much, as if to say that he said that humbly but having overheard that, Horikita honestly admired him.

"You managed to gain points through your personal activities."

".....yeah. But there's a lot of 2nd year and 3rd year seniors who have gotten tens of thousands of points so I can't be cocky just yet. If the accomplishments are significant, it can also affect the class point after all. From the second semester onwards too, I'm going to accomplish more and more."

Sudou said as he crossed his arms and made a Guts pose.

Towards the Sudou who accomplished something she could not, Horikita honestly paid her respects.

"The day you contribute significantly to the class may be close at hand." she said.

Truthfully, I also had such a premonition. If nothing bad happens, Sudou is an existence that could be a boon to the class.

However, it doesn't mean there's nothing to worry about. It's very easy for Sudou to make enemies. In regards to that, I'll have to watch over him together with Horikita who has the same tendency as him.

We walked towards the 'Special Swimming Facility' for the exclusive use of the swimming club linked to the edge of the school grounds. In regards to this area, entry has been permitted to us even without the special need to wear our uniforms. It already seems to be a huge hit especially considering it's the last day.

Prior to even entering the pool, already the place seems to be crowded with a large number of students. But as expected of such a futuristic school, separate locker rooms for the different grades have already been prepared.

It was normally an area one could not easily enter, but by following the instructions of a kindly placed guide board, we could enter the area without getting lost.

"Then everyone, let's meet back up here in 20 minutes."

Pointing at the corridor that connects to the pool, Ichinose said that. It's extremely helpful to have an organizer like her around.

"Hah, hah."

At the same time the girls walked off, Ike sighed like that in arousal and started to walk briskly.

I can understand the feelings of excitement, but it's no good to be in that kind of state right here and now.

He was the first to reach the locker room. I lightly hit Ike's back and urged him to enter the locker room. Right after entering the locker room, Ike and Yamauchi both went to occupy the innermost locker as quickly as they could.

"H-Hey, you guys. For us, today is going to be a special day. Don't you have that sort of feeling?"

"Yeah. We are going to go beyond anyone in our class, and anyone in this whole school."

Ike and Yamauchi started talking in a loud voice that went beyond normal hearing level and started attracting the attention of others.

Sudou who could no longer stand that sight, went over and grabbed their necks with both his hands and put them in a headlock.

"Guuu! What're you doing, Ken!"

"You guys are causing too much of a ruckus. I feel your rush too but it's dangerous to stand out too much." he said.

"...y-yeah that's right I guess. Sorry, sorry. It hurts!"

As a lesson, Sudou smashed the foreheads of those two together. It's a slightly aggressive one but overall not a bad method.

"You're being surprisingly calm, Sudou." I told him.

"I wasn't expecting much from the beginning after all. And besides, I'm torn between half feeling happiness and the other half not feeling it. Thinking about it rationally now, it's something that would make Suzune sad. I really don't want them to see such a defenseless Suzune too. A true man seduces his girl on his own." Sudou said.

That sentiment is correct. If possible, I'd like these two to

learn that too but for Ike and Yamauchi right now it's only the sexual gratification in front of their eyes right now on their minds.

I check my phone. And when I did, a message came from Karuizawa saying she's just entered the locker room.

"Who's it from?"

Since Ike with a red forehead came by to look at my phone with suspicious eyes, I quickly put it down.

"Let's see, it's from a woman isn't it?" he asked me.

"Do you think I'm that popular?" I replied.

".....that's also true I guess. Alright, let's change! Spread out the towels!!!"

I did want him for a moment to affirm my statement, but I shut that feeling off in my heart.

In the end, whether good luck comes by or not is something they'll just have to bet on, for Ike and the others.

* * *

"This is already totally a luxury facility....."

The large pool facility that is normally used for club activities, seemed completely different today.

Naturally there were a large number of students crowding the place but in addition to that, food stands were also extensively opened all over the place. Light meals, the staple of food stands, in other words junk food were also abundant.

Hot dogs, yakisoba and okonomiyaki and the such.

Although that in itself was a surprise, even stranger was the fact that senior students seemed to be managing it all.

From serious students without a smile to students happily working away, there were various students like that. It's almost like I'm looking at a special examination.

"I wonder what kind of plot this is?"

I don't know about that but the certain thing is they seem to be in a festive mood in any case.

As I stood around waiting for the girls to arrive, I felt the atmosphere around me make a complete change.

Putting in effort is a basic prerequisite for people to attract positive attention to themselves. To put it in an easy-to-understand manner, take studying for example. If you were the foremost at it or took 1st place, people around you will take notice of it. Once again, demonstrating remarkable success in sports will also cause people to pay attention to you.

But there are also exceptions to that.

One of those is a conspicuous appearance. Handsome men and beautiful women, it doesn't matter which, that class of people will find it easier to bathe in attention than the ones I cited above.

Of course I'm not saying they're not putting in effort to maintain their outward appearances but there's no denying that such a special element exists to this.

I can't speak for other schools but at the very least in regards to this school, I can safely say that the 'appearance' level is high. The members of the group currently going out with us aside as a matter-of-fact, a lot of the students around us I don't know the names of are also obviously high-level visually speaking.

Of course there are all sorts of people and there's no denying that but normally the cream doesn't rise to the top to this degree. It would be natural that Ike and the others spend each and every day aroused and excited.

And on top of that outside appearance, I wonder how it would be if even their inside personalities were to be perfect. Cute and fashionable around people and excelling in academics. Anyone's gaze would be stolen away by a girl like that.

In the loud corridor of the facility, all the male students almost simultaneously turned their gaze towards a single place.

"Hey---, this is a huge crowd, isn't it?"

Then, without even noticing their gazes and bathing in their attention, the figure of Ichinose appeared at the scene of the meetup.

"Hey....."

Not knowing where else to look, I directed my gaze towards the wall as I lightly raised my hand to answer her.

"Where are the others? I thought the boys would be faster at changing." Ichinose said.

"They're still changing."

It could be said that due to various circumstances at play they were late too.

"But really, you've finished changing rather quickly."

Considering that it wasn't that far apart from me, that's quite a feat.

"Nyahaha, I'm confident in my changing speed."

She answered with a slightly proud tone like that to something that's not really a feat to boast of. This innocence, too, may be the secret to Ichinose's popularity.

"Ohh? Ayanokouji-kun, you've bought a rash guard?"

"You may think it strange for a man, but I don't like exposing my skin in front of other people. If it use it outside of classes there's no problem, I've heard that and so I thought to buy one."

"I see, I see. I think that's fine too. It's not a violation of the regulations." she said.

There aren't very many but in this facility there are

students like me who are also wearing an outer garment despite being men.

Ichinose, who had started directing her attention towards me, used her index finger like a pin and poked my belly from over my garments.

"It's pretty hard. Also, your body's just the right ideal amount of slender without being excessively muscular."

Touching me all over without any reservation, she repeats the same action on my arms and my shoulders among other parts.

I was fortunate enough to have the additional income to buy myself an outer garment. I'll have to thank Katsuragi.

"Do you exercise?"

"No, I don't. It's just the material of my garments or my skin simply being hard making it like that. It must be because I don't exercise daily." I said.

"Hmmm....."

Ichinose dropped her gaze towards my legs but immediately stopped asking questions.

But even so, being in proximity to Ichinose like this, I'd become conscious of her monstrous---no, large breasts.

How am I going to swim or race in this condition? In the first place, my ability to properly move itself is suspect.

"...but really they're late. I'll go check on them."

What am I doing and why am I doing what I'm doing, I understand those well. It's because I could no longer bear to stand beside the swimsuit-clad Ichinose and so I turned heel and headed back towards the men's changing room.

Then once again spending some time with Ike and the others, once preparations were complete together we all headed back out towards the corridor.

Although it must be a result of some time having passed since then, all the girls including Horikita have assembled.

"Wow.....!"

Ike, whose voice leaked from the spectacular sight of the girls in front of him, desperately tried to rein in his voice.

In regards to Sakura, she shrunk all the way towards the back. Naturally, she was wearing a rash guard that hid her chest.

But it seems like not everyone was able to conceal their arousal towards seeing the swimsuit-clad forms they would normally not be able to see.

"Fufufu, I can see it. Underneath that thin swimsuit layer, those breasts, that place!"

Ike and Yamauchi were looking at the girls as though they had X-ray vision. They really seem to be living it up.

"Then, shall we go? For now it looks like the one at the far back is vacant."

First we moved to secure a place where we could take out

breaks. Even here, as if to take the lead, Ichinose walked ahead.

Then, as if to match Ichinose, Kushida too. As they did, the boys fell in line right behind them. It seems their objectives are the gently swaying asses of Ichinose and Kushida.

But even amongst them, Sudou stood at Horikita's side and showed no signs of moving away. These two, in a way, are properly developed too. Unexpectedly they might become a good, well-suited couple.

Next, I routinely moved onto Sakura.

"Umm.....thank you....."

When only the two of us were left, Sakura ever so slightly thanked me.

Towards that figure, I could not help but ask a question.

"Why are you thanking me?"

"Why?"

Towards that question, Sakura answered me strangely. Then realized that there was no reason why I'd have an idea

"Umm that's, for inviting me out today....."

"What's that even supposed to mean? This is normal isn't it? Because you're my friend." I told Sakura.

Towards Sakura, the word 'friend' easily came out of my mouth. Hearing that from me, Sakura's eyes lit up like a little puppy and she happily gazed at me.

"That's why it's not something you need to be thanking me over."

I repeated that once again, but it doesn't seem like Sakura feel the same way.

"Still, thank you."

"No....well I guess it's fine."

A question mark floated above my head but let's allow her to conclude it on her own. She's probably this type of person. That's why I'm able to relax while together with her without feeling any bad feelings.

But even so, Sakura's really becoming a straightforward person. She's matured to the extent she's almost unrecognizable as the person I first met.

Even though a fellow classmate confessed to her, without running away from it she properly received it. Seeing her grow from day to day, I couldn't help but think that perhaps I too, might be able to change.

"I've noticed this just recently but you know, during PE lessons the teacher's always telling us that swimming will definitely be useful to us later. That was referring to the uninhabited island test."

Towards the Sakura who informed me of this with blazing eyes, there's no need to bungle it up and depress her.

"I see, now that you mention it that's certainly true." I told her.

"As I thought!"

Perhaps she felt happy about her deduction but Sakura slightly bounced around innocently.

I could see her large breasts swaying over the rash guard. This really makes her unable to take off her outer garments. As big as they are, the situation won't bring about anything good, I felt a little sympathy for the circumstances faced by girls.

In any case, through our conversation, I'm happy that I was able to discover a new side to Sakura. But, Sakura immediately made an apologetic face.

"If I participated in the classes properly without being embarrassed, I wonder if I would have been more useful to you.....I was just using the excuse of poor health to run away the whole time....."

"If you've realized even that, isn't that more than enough?"

The students who've lived only for themselves up until now have slowly begun to realize that this alone won't cut it.

A person cannot live alone. Unless one plans on living like a hermit holed up on a mountain, there's no other choice but to live collectively together.

The majority of middle and high school students don't realize this fact. They live in solitude absorbed in the internet or in their social games. Or there are delinquents who bother the public by committing minor offenses or serious crimes.

Unaware of how one should cooperate with and help

others around you. Depending on the circumstances, there are also those who live their whole lives never realizing that.

But this school is different. Their way of doing it is unique but I feel like they're attempting to tell each individual student something. As a matter of fact, Sakura beside me has begun to realize this. That perhaps there was something she could do for the class. That will one day be a great asset.

"Hmm? If it isn't Ichinose and the others. So you guys also came here today."

As we walked around looking for space, three male students called out to Ichinose. One of them was someone I recalled and when he realized my presence, he lightly nodded. It was Class B's Kanzaki.

"Yahho---if it isn't Shibata-kun and the others."

The boy named Shibata raised his hand in answer. He also answered us from Class D with a smile too.

"This seems like a fun mix of people. Let us join in too."

"I'm perfectly fine with it but.....is it ok?"

Kushida nods that there's no problem as though it was a matter-of-fact. By doing this, Ike and the others had their right to veto automatically annihilated.

Ultimately the three from Class B joined us and the total number of people rose to a large household number of 13.

"Sorry for disturbing you guys."

Kanzaki, who knows that I'm not the type to argue against the general flow, approached me and said that.

Seeing that, Sakura took a step backwards. It was a brilliant way of erasing her presence so Kanzaki won't notice her.

"This is also fine isn't it? It's the last day of the summer vacation after all."

"There are few chances in this school to get along with students from other classes, you see. Shibata and the others also seem happy."

"You're not like them."

Kanzaki was calm as usual, or more like I felt as though he was making contact with me from a distance.

"I'm just similar to you, Ayanokouji. I'm not good at dealing with the liveliness."

As I conversed casually with Kanzaki while walking, from the direction ahead of us we could hear a wave of cheers rising up.

"They're being rowdy over there."

Sudou said that.

As I raised my head to look, at the center of the uproar a splash of water rose up. And at the same time as that, a person and a ball both fluttered up towards the sky.

A violently driven spike hit the opponent's coat underwater. It seems they were playing volleyball at the pool.

"Woah! That's amazing! That guy, isn't he really next level?!"

Yamauchi, beholding that sight with his eyes, shouted out.

In this large facility there were 3 pools that were prepared and they seem to be used for the playing of different games.

One of them is a standard pool you can go swimming in whenever you feel like it. One of them is something like a flowing pool. And finally, the last one is a pool geared towards amusement and is a sports-use pool.

And now in that sports-use pool, surrounded by a large amount of girls a fierce round of volleyball was occurring. They were students I've never seen before. A number of them seemed mature like an adult so the majority of them are probably 2nd year or 3rd year students.

A male-female mixed team and their high-level plays were unfolding.

But even amongst them, there was one male student in particular who stood out conspicuously.

"He's amazing....."

The one who Sudou praised was indeed that male student with a conspicuous aura.

That slender composition of his would at first glance, seem to be delicate. But on his body, one could see a six-pack. But what stands out most of all from him was the blonde hair that flows gently whenever he moves intensely and the extremely prepared look on his features. He was so handsome one could

almost mistake it for an illusion of seeing a movie on a screen.

And it seems most of the female students too, had their eyes stolen away completely by this handsome man.

"Khhhhh, that's the type of guy I hate the most. It's not like he's that talented or putting in that much effort, he's just in the winning camp because of his good looks."

It's not like I couldn't understand Ike and the others with their venomous feelings, but their expectations were promptly betrayed.

A handsome man who bathes in attention. The sharp glint in his eyes vividly makes him stand out above all else.

The ball tossed out of courtesy in that handsome man's own team, and in response he leaps up high.

Forgetting the fact that in that moment, most of the girls raised their voices, I killed my breath and watched him.

He had an acute angle, and high speeds and the bullet, no, the ball assaulted the enemy's position.

The student on the other side who picked up that ball too, had superior physical abilities, as they showed an agile response in jumping in to play the ball.

"Wow!"

As screams like that rose up all around, at the same time the handsome man's team received increasing points.

No matter who looks at it, that handsome man's superior

physical abilities should be evident. Looking at the way the lower half of his body was developed, perhaps he's involved in sports that focuses on the use of legs. Running club perhaps? Baseball and soccer are also possibilities.

"H-He's handsome, and smart and can handle himself in sports too.....who the hell!?"

"Things are getting quite lively, aren't they? He alone rules over that place."

"It looks like it. I don't know who from where he is though."

Because both me and Horikita are weak in regards to knowing about other classes and students of other grades and their circumstances.

In cases like this, it's best to ask Kushida, whose network extends wider than anyone else's. And the answer to our questions came immediately.

"That man is the 2nd year Class A's Nagumo-senpai. He's extremely popular amongst girls."

"Nagumo....."

Recently, I've been familiarized with that name. Ichinose then explains more about Nagumo.

"The current vice-president and the man who will become the student council president next year. He's really smart." Ichinose said.

Having been standing beside us listening to our

conversation, Ichinose reacted to Nagumo's name and answered us like that.

Furthermore, towards the keyword "Student Council" that Ichinose uttered, Horikita who was also standing beside me showed a slight reaction.

And every time the student named Nagumo moves and shows off his activity, a high-pitched shrill scream rises. In the pools, at the same time there were also other matches occurring but most of the girls did not look at anything else except Nagumo.

"For all his popularity I don't know him at all. You too right, Ayanokouji-kun? Indeed his physical abilities seem to be that of a prodigy's but compared to his popularity I don't think it's really all that amazing. In this regard, the student coucil president would overwhelmingly surpass him, wouldn't he?" Horikita said.

That was rather brazen of her. Hiding the fact that he's her actual older brother while praising him like that.

But in regards to that aspect, it seems Ichinose does not have any objections as she honestly admitted to it.

"Yes well the student council president is amazing, so there's that. In this school's history the current student council president can almost be said to be the most talented one ever. Speaking of which, he has the same last name as you, Horikita-san, doesn't he?"

"It seem so, yes."

It seems she has no intention of answering here, but

Horikita simply shrugs it off.

"But, there are rumors that he isn't losing to that student council president in terms of ability too. As a matter of fact, in the elections held last year, President Horikita and Vice-President Nagumo fought for the seat of student council president they say. At the time, even though Vice-President Nagumo was only a 1st year student." Ichinose said.

"You're really familiar with student council business aren't you?" Horikita asked her.

"It's because I joined the student council. So about things like that, I inevitably ended up remembering them." Ichinose replies.

".....you did?"

Having heard that, it seems Horikita was unable to hide her surprise.

But still, to think Ichinose joined the student council. Speaking of which the day I met her for the first time, she was talking to the homeroom teacher of Class B, Hoshinomiya-sensei, regarding 'student council business'.

Unfortunately I have no intention of working under "that" student council president but thinking about how the system of this school is set up, the significance of joining the student council must be extremely large.

"By the way, what's the condition to enter the student council? It's not like just anyone can enter is it?"

"Hmm, this school is a bit special. In the case that you are

unaffiliated, between April and the end of June, if you pass the interview for the student council of October, then you can join, something like that. To tell the truth, the first time I was rejected, but since you can take it as many times as you want, I persisted at it. The student council president never really agreed but Vice-President Nagumo made the final decision on it. I heard it later from Vice-President Nagumo but it seems President Horikita is disappointed with this year's 1st year students. On average each year about 2-3 1st year students get accepted, but this year the only one who was accepted so far is me. That's why I'd like to hurry up and triumph over this. Maybe in October, President Horikita might be stepping aside."

Just like how Horikita is putting in effort to get closer to her brother, Ichinose is probably also struggling her best.

"But I think my goal will definitely be Nagumo-senpai. Senpai had a similar start to me and we get along well too. In this school, all student council presidents in its history started out in Class A but Nagumo-senpai, just like me, started out in Class B. And before we realized it, he's already unmistakably in line to be the next student council president. That's why after Nagumo-senpai, I will be student council president---just kidding."

It seems inside Ichinose, compared to the older Horikita, her evaluation of Nagumo is higher. She spoke the words that she herself wanted to be student council president one day expressed her determination.

It seems some of that, no, probably from the bottom of her heart, it did not sit right with Horikita as she snapped at it.

"From the moment he started out late, you should already be capable of imagining his potential."

"Oi, oi....."

You're free to think whatever you want but isn't that self-destructive to you too? From the very fact that you started out in Class D you'd already be judged.....or could it be she's---

"Could it be you, still think you were assigned to Class D because of a mistake.....?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

She replied to me like that.

No hesitation, boldly and even naturally.

"Well, I understand why Horikita-san would feel this is strange. It doesn't seem like the classes are decided based on ability alone. Your intellectual ability is of course as a human being, your maturity and cooperativeness. It's only after seeing all such abilities that we are evaluated, isn't it?"

"That is in other words-----saying there's a problem with my coordination ability?" Horikita asked.

"Ahh, no, sorry if that's how it came off to you I apologize. But you see, think about it for a bit. Basically Horikita-san is the type to believe in herself. If we turn that backwards, it could also be taken to mean that you're self-centered. When we head out into society, a person who's self-centered and a person who adheres to the instructions they are given, isn't it a case-by-case thing to see which one is more talented?"

Even if you are a self-centered person, if you are a talented person you'll still be needed in the world but that is not always absolute.

However, on the other hand, those who adhere to the instructions will be vital almost anywhere and again will be people in demand.

"I'm not convinced....."

Her attitude itself has not changed, but even so, Horikita's mental state should slowly begin changing.

Since Ichinose called out to a friend, I slightly closed my distance with Horikita.

"Speaking of which, you didn't announce your candidacy to run for the student council, did you? Didn't you choose this school because you wanted to be by your brother's side?" I asked her.

".....this and that are different things. Even you can at least imagine it, can't you? Even if I wanted to join the student council and took an interview for it, I would absolutely not be acknowledged."

Certainly it's not that hard to imagine. Even Ichinose from Class B was not accepted initially, if it's Horikita from Class D.....he probably wouldn't allow the sister he wanted to expel from the school to join. So that means she's the one most aware of something like that.

I watched the match for a while like that, but ultimately Nagumo's team overwhelmed the other team and won.

The girls who were cheering Nagumo on eventually began to gather around him as he climbed out of the pool onto the poolside.

"Hey, that guy's got a piercing on his ear! Is that even fine!?".

Ike, who could no longer find anything except that to interject in with, shouted that out.

"Right now we're in the middle of summer vacation so isn't it fine?"

But even those words were in vain because Ichinose retorted to him like that.

"N-No, but I mean. He's got a hole in his ear!? That's a big problem!"

"I think those are probably non-hole piercings, aren't they? You can put them on your ear without opening a hole up in it. Normally in school, he always dresses neatly."

"Ugugu!"

No matter how far the interjections go, it seems he's a completely flawless student.

"Hey, why don't we also play volleyball in the pool? We have Shibata-kun and the others so about 6 people and you guys have about 7 people so it'll be fine even if we play on rotation."

Since we came all the way out to the pool, Ichinose made a proposal like that. The first one to agree with her was Ike.

"I'll do it, I'll do it! Like Nagumo-senpai, I'll also collect the passionate gazes of the girls!" Ike said.

I think that's probably impossible but a lot of the students seem to be in favor of it.

Since they've come all the way out to the pool, they probably want to play to their heart's content.

"U-Umm. I'm bad at physical activity so...I'll just watch."

She pulled back reservedly, or rather, seeming like she really doesn't want to do it Sakura said that. Since it was obvious that she's of the attitude of not wanting to play volleyball, there were no objections in particular.

As for numbers, this is basically a 6v6 game but one seems to be leaking complaints about the volleyball match itself.

"I'm not feeling it either."

Even though she owes me a debt, it doesn't seem like she's in the mood to play along.

"Horikita-san, are you going to run away?"

Laughing, Ichinose said that as if to provoke her.

"There's no such thing as running or anything when it comes to just a simple game."

"Indeed it's just a game. But it's also like a miniaturized version of our classes right? Which one is more ambitious, which one has superior teamwork. In a sense, this is a simulated competition between classes? Or are you saying

you don't wish to fight against us?" Ichinose asked.

A proposal almost like an examination that includes analysis of our combat potential. If you think of it that way, there would be no reason to decline.

".....fine. Let's do it."

Class B, who would become our enemy in the not-too-distant future.

Right now it's just a game, but they probably also want to confirm the ability of their opponents too. Horikita, who accepts the challenge from Ichinose.

"And now, to make the match more entertaining, the winner will enjoy the full expenses of lunch for free. Is it fine to add a bonus like this?"

"I'll accept that condition too."

Having submitted our application to use the court, until one is vacant we each devise our own strategies. The rules of the match are 15 points per set with 3 sets for the match.

The team who gets 2 sets first will be declared the winners. As for serve rights, it'll be done via rotation and the one that nets a point gets the right to serve again.

"This is a game. But a match is a match. Since we're doing it, we're winning it."

"Horikita-san, you're unusually fired up."

"If I hear that lunch would be free, I might think that. But

that's not it. To treat this number of people there's a possibility of spending up to 10,000 points. In other words, it's still private points but it also means our gap with Class B will shorten by that much. On the contrary, if we lose the gap will widen by that much. It's just like a special exam." Horikita said.

Even if the losing amount were to be shared between everyone, it would be about 2000 points each. Not a cheap thing.

"Alright. Let's win this, Ken, Haruki!"

Motivations differ from person to person but Horikita seems to have shifted their mindset in a good direction.

"Leave it to me, Suzune. If I'm here that's the strength of 100 men. Those kinds of meatheads, I'll scatter them all." Sudou said.

"No.....meathead is a word that's used to represent a person like Sudou, you know?"

Towards the Sudou who seemed to be magnificently misunderstanding it, I interjected.

"What'd you mean? Meathead means someone with a gold medal for their brains, in other words, someone who studies too much right?" Sudou asks.

It seems Sudou is misunderstanding magnificently like a meathead.

"That may be the case.....please forget what I just said."

Interjecting itself is just a troublesome matter. Because Sudou was looking at the members of Class B and laughed with room to spare. Giving off the confidence that there is no way he could possibly lose.

"Let me test out whether or not you can be used, Sudou-kun."

Even though when it comes to studying he was just pulling on her legs, in a situation like this he seems to be a reassuring ally to have. I can understand Horikita's feelings for expecting a lot from him.

In Class D, the one with the best physical abilities would be Sudou. As an exception, there is Kouenji, but it's better for better or for worse to not count him.

"Sudou, do you have experience playing volleyball in a pool?"

"No. I've played some volleyball in class is all."

"You're quite confident for someone like that.....".

"Basketball connects to all sports---it's something that the seniors I respect have said."" Sudou said.

Believing in one's own power without doubts. For Horikita too, it's a good chance to determine whether Sudou is all talk or not.

* * *

"Alright, leave it to me!"

Looking at the ball gently alighting, Sudou jumped to a great height.

And with that marvelous jumping power and using his own body as a spring, he struck the ball. The ball, sharp as a bullet, then assaulted the enemy's position.

Ichinose eagerly snaps at it, but unlike on land, her movements in water were slow and she could not make it in time. There were no cheers rising up for him, but that power of his was equal to if not superior to that of Nagumo which I had seen just a while ago.

"Yeah!"

Easily scoring like that, Sudou made a Guts pose. So this is what it means to be in one's own element. His ally, Horikita, also stared at Sudou's movements in admiration.

"That was an amazing ball just now, you really got us there."

Picking up the ball floating on the water, Ichinose handed it back to Sudou. She expresses her admiration towards him.

"Heh. Well, I guess a woman really can't return my attacks. I need to dial it down." Sudou said.

"Mumu. Discriminating against women? I'll have you know even girls won't lose to boys."

Towards an aggressive statement like that, Ichinose replied like that while laughing without anger as she returned to her original position.

It was a match that started with Class B's serve but already Sudou was showing off his accomplishments in leaps and bounds and we've already gained a 7 to 3 lead.

"Sudou-kun has a large defensive range and high attack power, we need to avoid his area as much as possible....."

Becoming more cautious of the Sudou who was pulling his team up, Kanzaki shoots back at the serve Yamauchi released.

"Ok, Ichinose. Then give me the ball, I've found our target!"

"Roger!"

Towards the ball that was falling on her own team's turf, Ichinose courteously raised it back up towards a more favorable position.

The one who leaped up in response to the falling ball was Shibata.

Shibata attacks. The target destination of his attack is--- sadly right in front of me. If this is not a coincidence then this would mean that they've determined that the biggest hole here is me.

"Get it, Ayanokouji!"

As strict words like that came from Sudou, I took a step forward in the water. The speed of the ball itself was not in itself fast. It shouldn't be difficult to just touch it. I extended my hand.

Beh!

A dull sound like that rang out.

"Geh....."

I did repel the ball, but it brilliantly spiralled out far away.

"Yay!"

On the other side, having seen this situation, Ichinose and Shibata exchanged a high-five like that.

Naturally Sudou intensely glares at me with a forceful fervor.

"What the hell was that? That bad play just now!" Sudou said.

"Sorry.....this is a good example of a point taken in a magnificent manner and one taken in a simple manner having the same value in the end." I replied.

"Don't fuck around, you. Even if your angle is that messed up that's fine, but at least get the ball up in the air."

Sudou told me but even if I get told that it's problematic. This is the first time in my life I've played volleyball. It won't be as convenient for me.

"Hey, hey calm down Sudou. I'll get it back with my splendid serve."

Having picked up the ball that had fallen nearby, Ike began to serve on his own.

"Sha---!"

And with a 'boyon' like sound, the ball strangely flew towards the territory on the other side. It flew towards where the girls were, and as a matter-of-fact was tossed back up and then the attacker Ichinose jumped up.

"These guys are useless!"

Blocking the ball that Ichinose struck with his arms, Sudou sent it back towards the Class B side.

This time, it was Kanzaki who tossed the ball back up and once of the girls there sent it back towards us.

Towards the ball that was accelerating towards me, Sudou used his great height to block it. Sudou, who brilliantly covered for me, charged at me and blocked it.

"Take this---!"

Seeing the Sudou who could no longer make a move, Ichinose jumped high while shouting that. In that moment, her breasts swayed. Ike, Yamauchi and myself all had our gazes stolen by that sight.

"Back!"

As Sudou lands, he shouted that at us, and when he did, Horikita who was in the vicinity, tossed the ball from Ichinose back up and raised it back up towards a more favorable spot.

The game had only just begun, but already it was a place where Sudou made the judgement.

For Sudou, whose has incredible power, there were pretty much no girls capable of receiving his attacks.

The boys Kanzaki and Shibata were holding on, but firstly and secondly Sudou had superior technique and power and that's why they were both forced onto the defensive.

The only strategy Class B could take now is to not let Sudou have his freedom. Or not give Sudou the ball. On the other hand, on the Class D side both Horikita and Kushida had good physical abilities and above average offense and defense power. A stable lineup.

On the flip side, including me, Ike and Yamauchi became the weak link.

"Gyaa---! Sorry!"

Instead of snapping at the serve that landed near him, Yamauchi ended up letting Class B take a point away. Every time he charges, Sudou's frustration grows and he clicks his tongue. It can't be helped because most of those were towards the three of us.

"Calm down, Sudou-kun. You're doing your best, it's better not to move around carelessly."

"But...if we lost because of these useless guys it'll all be for nothing." Sudou replied.

Despite voicing his dissatisfaction, Sudou returns to his position.

Perhaps Ike felt irritated by that attitude, but when Sudou could not see him anymore he flipped his middle finger at Sudou. Seeing that, Yamauchi also flipped his middle finger at him.

"Oi, Haruki. It's the death sentence for you later."

"Gyaa---!"

But unfortunately he ended up looking back towards Yamauchi.

Furthermore, as if routing the enemy, once the game resumed the balls coming from the opponents once again flew towards Yamauchi.

"T-This can't be!?"

In the water he's not used to and under pressure from Sudou, Yamauchi could not eagerly chase after it.

"GaboGabo*!"

"Damn it, it's pathetic when the girls are on the more useful side, don't you guys think that?"

Sudou, who has a strong presence in the field of athletics, released a blow that hollowed out our hearts like that.

Nobody wants to look lame in front of the girls. But it doesn't mean anything. Just like how one cannot improve their intellect overnight, right now in this place I cannot simply improve my physical abilities.

The ball once again descends onto my location. From the feeling of my failure the first time around, and assessing the surroundings for the receiving point I can extrapolate that as long as I watch the position of my arm and the rotation of the ball, only tossing it back up should theoretically not be a difficult thing to do.

I perceived the gently descending ball from that spot.

Then I properly received it---

But I did not overlook Ichinose's gaze peeking out from the enemy side. The instant I realized it, I deliberately chose to receive the ball in that spot in a clumsy manner.

I let my feet slip and ended up tumbling down in the pool.

"You're terrible, Ayanokouji."

As I got back up from underwater, Ike who was guarding the back laughed at me.

"Even if it's terrible or whatever as long as you toss it back up it's ok. You did good!"

Having been standing near me in case I tossed it back up, Sudou showed off several jumps I couldn't see well.

A fierce attack.

Throughout the match, almost on his own he's moving halfway around the water court. Even though he should have used up a fair bit of his stamina, he once again repeats his special attack with a power I couldn't even see. He's overwhelming even the Class B which is superior in terms of teamwork ability on an equal or even superior level.

Looking over such a Sudou, I decided to amuse myself with volleyball for a while.

* * *

"Nyabu---. We lost. Completely."

As I got out of the pool, Ichinose approached me looking frustrated and said that.

It was certainly just a game, but there were also unmistakably feelings of not wanting to lose to the other side that came out. It was the victory of Class D who consecutively won 2 sets.

"It was in the form of us almost relying completely on Sudou-kun though."

Near the Horikita who was honestly praising him, Sudou looked smug. He's probably happy to be praised by the girl he likes. This is even more true because it's coming from Horikita, who usually doesn't praise other people.

"You're in the basketball club, after all. There are some boys in our class who are in it also, but I've heard about you Sudou-kun. That you're the best out of al the 1st year students." Ichinose said.

"Naturally."

It seems he's known to the other classes too and that's more important than anything else.

In this volleyball match, no matter the feeling, I wonder if it ended up aiming for one significant thing. It means that Sudou's physical ability, which was already high initially, does not lose to those from the upper classes. It's a large harvest. If physical ability becomes part of an exam, Sudou will become a valuable weapon.

On the other side, looking at it from Ichinose's perspective, he becomes a scary existence that they must put a mark on.

"If you guys weren't pulling my leg, I could not have gotten a more thorough victory." Sudou said.

"Damn it, that Sudou's getting cocky just because he can do sports."

Yamauchi, who had collapsed on the pool side, looked at Sudou with a frustrated expression. It was because after the match, he received Sudou's attack and got knocked out.

Ultimately, charging in for the three of us who were pulling his leg was hard for him after all.

"Well, as long as we win that's good. That means we can eat whatever we want for lunch."

I guided Sudou's anger to collide with food. Let him eat more than the others. Ichinose and the others will be treating us after all.

"That's well, for us since we're broke that's something to be happy about."

It was a cheeky attitude for Sudou to take but undoubtedly he's made a big contribution in this match.

"So, there's nothing to do but uphold the promise. Shall we have lunch?"

Right on time, hunger struck our bellies with that timing.

Ichinose and the others, Sudou and the others headed for the shop. Horikita and I slightly took our time in following them.

"Hey Ayanokouji-kun. You're not too bad at sports, right? Even if you're just a beginner in volleyball, those were some unnatural movements." she said.

A while back, Horikita saw me go for a round with her brother (although it's not really that much) and has remembered that exchange.

"Ichinose's strange mark on me was pretty strong. Just saying in case."

"So you're not going to show your hand. Right now, the other classes must be tripping over themselves in trying to analyze Class D's strength."

She nods as though convinced.

Before long, as we arrived at the shop, Ichinose turned to look back.

"As promised, whatever you like, no matter the amount you want, you're free to eat." she said.

"Alright! Then we won't hold back!"

The 3 Idiots, more than the others, for the sake of their appetite, dashed as quickly as possible. Ichinose was looking at that sight with a smile.

"Could it be that you're going to bear all the cost?"

"Yeah. I'm the one who said that in the first place."

That may be true, but this is an amount of burden that one cannot stupidly bear.

"I usually make it a point to be frugal so everything's alright alright on that point."

Strangely listening to Ichinose's calm statement like that was Kushida.

"But Ichinose-san, didn't you use up a lot of points on your swimwear? I know I can't compare ourselves to Class B, but that's barely scraping by."

"Hmm. I'm not hung up on things like that, or you could say since I don't buy unnecessary things. As long as I do it in rotation there's no problem. Ahaha, that might be a bit of a problematic statement for a girl though."

"No such thing. Not buying unnecessary things is a very wonderful thing I think."

This might just be my prejudiced view, but in any case girls care about being fashionable. Kushida is also the same. Horikita is still indifferent but even she seems to pay attention to her hair and clothes.

"Because I don't know where in a more important place my points will be needed after all."

Ichinose declared that as such. That means, rather than buying a piece of clothing spending it here right now holds more meaning is what she's saying.

"Then, I'll also unreservedly be choosing my pick."

Horikita always has a small meal but since Class B is treating her she became aggressive in it.

"Ahaha. Yeah, it's ok. But it'd be bad to have leftovers so please stop that." Ichinose told her.

I'm not the same as Horikita but I'm very interested in junk food. I'll be choosing my pick.

* * *

Upon closing hours, Ichinose suggested going back before it became crowded which everyone agreed on.

While the others were preparing themselves, I secretly snuck out to the poolside waiting for my visitor.

"Ah, I’m tired....."

Soon, Karuizawa appeared slapping my back.

"Good work, how was it?"

"It was as you said. I’m feeling really disgusted about it."

"Don’t say that. You could say it’s the hot blood of youth flying off the handle."

Karuizawa, who stood beside me, made a sound as if vomiting then gave a look at her surroundings.

"So how was it? Been a long time since you last went to the pool?"

"It’s nothing, really. I don’t really feel anything but....."

She examined the area once more worryingly.

"Even though it’s a lie, I’m still seeing Hirata-kun. If I’m

seen alone with you, weird rumours may start spreading, you know."

"Really? If I was as handsome as Hirata that may be so, though sadly to say, my presence is pretty bleak. We probably look like one of the groups who came to play at the pool."

This wasn't a situation where a boy and a girl being together would mean something suspicious. It would be different if it was evening at a bench nobody frequented.

Since it was crowded it was easy to blend in. By the way, Hirata, who acted as the boyfriend, was nowhere to see at the pool. Probably busy with the club. I don't know about the soccer club practises but from what I've heard, he is one active guy.

"We were allowed to wear rash guards today, you saw some here and there, right?"

"Well, yeah. But are you alright with the money for this? Wasn't it expensive?"

"It's necessary expenses after all."

Karuizawa reached out her hand so I casually gripped it. I felt the hard texture of something on my palm. The whole ordeal didn't last more than one second.

"What are you planning?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you different from the others, you could have enjoyed your happy little youth if you let it go, right?"

I see. So we are moving the topic to what I was holding in my hand.

"Firstly, I have to make sure the class isn't disadvantaged for now. Even if it's a small thing, it may lead to mistrust between each other. That's what I want to avoid."

That's why I called her here. Letting her enjoy the pool was also one of my aims.

"Did you invite someone else today?"

"It's just me now. There were two others, but I had them disperse to have fun."

"A good call."

I began walking by the poolside. She hurried after me.

"Are you aiming for class A then?"

"You not interested?"

"Hmm, I don't know. Points are always good to have and I'd be happy to land a job but..."

With her hands in her pockets, she kicked the air.

"I'm not very interested in fighting those guys from class C, I think."

If she was to face them again, the memory of that incident will resurface, thus making her unable to show her true potential, unless the curse binding her is lifted.

"I want to talk to you about something."

"What?"

"I don’t know what the next exam will entail, but I will be preparing the arrangements for a certain plan."

"Arrangements?"

While walking, blending in with the surroundings, I put the unusually important things into words. I haven’t even told Horikita about it.

"To expel someone."

"——What?"

She froze for a second, maybe from not quite understanding what I said. Realising that I didn’t stop, she hurried after me.

"W-wait, what did you mean by that?!"

"Exactly what I said. I’m going to force the expulsion of a first year. The idealistic ones would be those three girls who know about your past. If that won’t work, then someone else. If that’s impossible then—"

"T-then?"

"Then some useless humans from class D."

"You even understand what you are saying? It’s not easy to expel someone in the first place."

"Is that so? Not really. I have such a way available to me right now."

I clenched my fist, making her turn her attention to it.

"You mean, that what it was for...?"

"Depending on the situation I could get the expulsion in a swipe. Right?"

"B-but, wait a bit. How did it come to this? Didn't you make every effort to save him earlier?"

I did indeed rescue him from his expulsion crisis. But that was in the past when I didn't need to aim for class A.

I'm preparing to make my way, even though it may be temporarily, to that class. Which means cutting away the useless existences is mandatory. As Horikita once told me.

"Even after saving Sudou, you are going to kick him off?"

"Nah, not Sudou. A human with his physical strength is important for the class."

There aren't many students in the other classes that have physical abilities comparable to him. Kouenji aside, Sudou, with his high potential, is an important existence.

"What will happen to our class points if someone is expelled...?"

"Well of course, the best option would be to expel someone from the other classes."

Though having said that, if someone from our class gets expelled, the rest would work their hardest to not undergo the same treatment. That wouldn't exactly be bad either.

"You are horrible you know?"

"You should know that already, right?"

"...Well yeah."

I threatened her, my actions even approached rape. I don't think she has a good impression of me.

"How about consulting Hirata?"

"I wonder about that. Hirata isn't someone I can fully trust as of now."

"Eh?"

"You know about his past?"

"Ah, yes. He told me about it when I talked about my past. His friend commited suicide, right?"

Indeed. He told me the story, as if he was regretting or repenting. That was probably true.

"In that case, did his friend's suicide lead him to become a defective student and end up in class D?"

"Eh——?"

"That wouldn't be the reason for a smart and popular person like him to end up in our class."

It would have been understandable if he had lots of absences and low grades like Karuizawa, but I haven't heard anything like that of him. No traces of it either. Thus I can't trust him at this stage.

"So that’s why you asked my about my past yesterday..."

"To assess Hirata’s situation. A trauma in the past doesn’t equal a seat in class D."

After confirming that with Karuizawa I was convinced she was a trustworthy person.

The problem is with Hirata.

He would be very difficult to deal with. I have no idea if he speaks the truth or lies so I have to figure him out discreetly.

"You are really extracting answers from me when you don’t even tell me anything."

"Hmm?"

"You are not normal either. Something must have happened to you as well, that's what I think."

"Not really."

"That’s a lie."

Nothing. There was no bullying like in her case, there was no attempted suicide like Hirata’s beloved friend either.

"I know it from looking at your eyes. You can even kill people without hesitation, that’s what I feel from you."

"So violent. Nothing that dramatic happened in my past either."

It was truly nothing. So little I cannot even talk about it. Just a "Pure White" existence.

Her eyes was gripping onto me as she watched me. She was probably quite interested in the continuation. There was no doubt that holding onto this would affect the later events.

However—

What are you going to do with it?

As if to answer the feelings behind this question, I clenched my fist even harder. The plastic made a screeching sound as it was bent and mangled.

"W-what?"

I went to a garbage bin close by and threw away the plastic bits.

"I won't expel anyone from class D. I need to go back to my group. Thanks for today."

"That's fine too, I guess..."

"Let's return then."

It was approaching the closing hours and the students were flowing out from the changing rooms. Which group you belonged to influenced when you left.

The group returning before closing hours like Ichinose, the group that returned once the time was up or the group leaving right before it closed. I wonder which group is the fastest.

We were, on the other hand, seeing the leaving back of the students off. After a while, there were none left except for the

pool lifeguards.

"Not leaving yet?"

"You know the answer already so why ask? I have some circumstances on my own to consider when changing."

She said, in a bit frustrated tone, as she patted her jacket on the part that hid the scar.

She couldn't show this to anyone. That's why she couldn't use the congested changing rooms. That being said, she couldn't go home without changing. Thus being the last to change was the only solution.

"You can swim in that competition swimsuit, right?"

There would be no need to worry about her scar drawing attention.

"It looks so lame so that's impossible, no way! I already hate it when we have to wear it during lessons, why do I have wear it during my spare time too, so lame."

Seems the girls have their own kind of hardships to consider. For Karuizawa who feared dropping in the class caste system, a swimsuit that showed little was a necessity.

"You like swimming?"

"Ha? Well, I don't exactly hate it."

In that case she could at least swim.

"How about taking a swim? There are nobody here except for the lifeguards and they are busy cleaning up."

She probably aware of the congestion so she wouldn’t blame me for it immediately.

"I’m fine..."

"Come on."

"As I said... I’m fine already!"

"You will be fine being seen with that swimsuit of yours."

"That’s not the problem, why do I have to show you my swimsuit...?"

It seems that was her problem. In that case, should I use a more forceful method to let her swim?

"That’s an order."

Once those words came out, she glared harshly at me.

"You really are the worst, I hate you!"

"You decide on whether to obey or not, which would it be?"

"......okay then."

She unwillingly followed my forceful order. Her lips pouting in dissatisfaction.

She removed her rash guard and left it on a chair. I looked at her swimsuit appearance. She was standing with her back facing me, not intending to turn around.

"Maybe I will have to wear this swimsuit for the rest of my life..."

She couldn't use the other kinds even if she liked them. Her scar would draw attention and she feared she would be asked about it. I moved close to her and forcibly grabbed her arm.

"W-wa, wait!?"

Then I pulled her towards the pool and pushed her into the water.

Splash!

The water sprayed. A lifeguard heard the splash and came towards us with a megaphone in his hand.

"We are closing! Please leave now!"

"Puhaa! What are you doing!"

As the angry face of a girl surfaced, I gave her my hands.

"Did you have fun?"

"You think being pulled into the water is fun?"

She grabbed my hand without hesitation. Then she pulled me towards her, in other words, into the water.

I didn't resist, I just let her pull me down. Even so, I made

sure to not crash into her as I fell. The even bigger splash would surely be enough to enrage the lifeguards even more.

Watching the lifeguards rushing in, Karuizawa laughed. She then caught sight of me surfacing and then pushed me down, sinking me into the water again. I think it was very childish even for me, but seeing her smiling face for just a little moment made me think it was worth it after all.

* * *

Having finished going for a round of swimming in the pool, perhaps it's due to having exhausted myself but I felt incredibly thirsty.

The other members must have felt the same too, as on our way back from the dusk-lit pool one of Ichinose's friends said this reservedly.

"Hey Honami-chan, I'm thinking I want to have some ice cream, how about it?"

"That's right---I think I might want to have some too."

Even though I'd say we were refreshed, there was still a seething heat left.

"If you're fine with it, why don't have make a detour before going back?"

Seeing a convenience store nearby, she said that. Perhaps everyone had the same idea as her as there were no objections.

As we entered the store together, the members of the group

all rushed to the ice cream corner. Horikita entered, seemingly conflicted about whether to have a drink but now exactly like her surroundings, it seems she now wants to have ice cream.

"I'll have this! The Ultra Choco Monaka!"

Ike extended his hands and grasped an ice cream that was 3 times the standard size. The price of it was almost 4 times the standard one.

I did feel like it was just a loss but if the person in question is satisfied with it then that's fine.

Sudou and Yamauchi chose to have kakigori while Ichinose chose to have ice candy. Even in such a place, I found it interesting that each of their personal idiosyncrasies were slipping into view. From behind my back, Sakura was looking on hesitantly.

"What'll you be doing?"

"Umm, w-what should I do?"

She flailed around in panic but it's natural that she would not be able to answer.

Because from a slight distance away, Sakura was eagerly standing on her tiptoes to look into the ice cooler and see its contents. It's just whether or not she could see a part of it from my point of view. Ike and the others, at a slight distance away, were lightly stretching their backs.

"Let's go."

"O-ok."

Since she seems to be having a difficult time buying ice cream, I followed up for her and together we chose our ice cream. Sakura seems to be confused and her hands were shaking.

"I wonder what I should do....."

"Do you dislike it? Ice cream." I asked her.

"No, I like them all. I've probably eaten all of the ones around here." she said while pointing towards the right half of the case.

As we were doing so, Horikita, who had also remained behind, chose her ice cream and went to the counter.

"Hurry up already---. You'll get left behind---"

Having finished paying, Ike says that jokingly.

Towards that statement, perhaps Sakura received it nervously as she becomes more pronouncedly rushed in her actions.

"Umm, ummmm.....sorry.....I'm, at a time like this, I'm the type to take my time when choosing....."

"There's no need to panic. He's just joking. I haven't decided yet either."

"Ayanokouji-kun, what will you be having then.....?"

"Me?"

Taking my attention off Sakura for a moment, I glanced at the contents of the case. Honestly, all I could see were that most of them looked identical to each other.

"I'll have this I suppose."

As I answered her, what I took into my hands was the standard soft cream. The one with the milk coiled around it round and round. There were also ones with chocolate mixed into them but let's leave those for next time.

"S-So, I'll have those too then. Because it's delicious." Sakura said.

I did feel like I forced her into making that choice, but if Sakura is satisfied with it then all is fine I suppose.

Having made our purchase and gone outside, together with everyone we gathered in the open space of the convenience store and began to eat.

Opening up the cup, and ferrying the soft cream into my mouth, I felt the soft milk melt and spread out inside me.

"This is...delicious..."

The sweetness and coldness that could end up being a bad habit seeps through my body. Honestly, this is revolutionary. I never knew ice cream was something this delicious.

It's just eating too much seems like it'll be bad for your body though.....

"You sure are eating it like it's that delicious---. It's almost like you're eating it for the first time in your life."

"I'm sure anyone would find this delicious. If it's in this simmering heat."

As a matter of fact, that would be obvious if you look at the figure that's eating it up this peacefully.

"I guess---. It's just you're eating it like it's so delicious, you see. It's the first time I've seen an expression like that."

"It's because he's like a doll. He never changes his expressions."

I received such an interjection from someone who's the same doll-type as me. I really can't accept this.

But despite that, perhaps it seems their opinions aligned, but Horikita and Ichinose were happily chatting away. Their topic changed from me to the upcoming second semester.

"Hey Ichinose, it's fine to talk and all but your ice cream's in a terrible shape."

"Wawa, it's real!".

It was only a matter of time before her ice candy melted in this heat. Panicking, Ichinose quickly licked the liquid that was dripping and put the stick into her mouth.

"Hahiharooshiherekurehe."

Perhaps she's expressing her gratitude while mumbling? She's saying something like that.

It seemed delicious even as the ice dripped onto the asphalt and left stains on top of it.

* * *

"It was a good day, today was fun. Right, everyone?"

"Yeah. It was fun being able to talk to Horikita-san and Sakura-san. Let's play together again."

The girls of Class B seemed to have spent the last day of the vacations satisfactorily since they thanked us.

Sakura, too, seemed to have opened up a little since she showed a small smile.

On the other hand, Ike and Yamauchi, as well as Sudou, seemed to be uneasy as after some farewells they got into the elevator.

"Ayanokouji, we'll be coming to play in your room later."

Leaving behind such an unnecessary word, they left.

"I wonder what happened? I got a more cheerful impression from them though."

"Today they seemed especially strange. It seems a certain someone knows what the matter is though."

They slighly glanced towards me, but I persisted in making no comments on it. I have various reasons for it.

"Then, I'll see you again at school, Ayanokouji-kun."

"See you again tomorrow then....."

Parting ways with Kushida and Sakura too, only me and Horikita were left in the lobby. I had thought she had only

stayed behind to avoid Kushida but even when another elevator arrived she made no move to get on.

"You're not going back?"

"How about you? If you're fine with it, why don't we have a little walk?"

"I guess so."

As I left the lobby with Horikita once again, while looking up at the sky dyed by the color of the sunset we walked along a tree-lined road.

"I had fun today. Occasionally it might not be too bad to have such a vacation too." she said.

That is, as the person in question admits too, a most surprising statement.

Horikita speaks slowly as her hair which had not fully dried yet flutters.

"From tomorrow, the second semester begins. Surely a tougher battle than the first semester awaits us."

"I suppose so."

The school should have normally given the newly enrolled students easy-to-understand, simple tests.

Yet the survival test on the uninhabited island, or having us deceive one another on the cruise ship, only tests far removed from ordinary high school students continued to be repeated. There's no way of knowing how much hardship awaits us

from now.

"I've been thinking various things over the summer vacation. The things I have done, I was able to do."

"And what could you tell from that?" I asked her.

"That's a secret.....even if I told you, you'd only laugh at me."

Perhaps there was something she thought was shameful, but saying that she dodged the question.

Epilogue: The Summer Vacation of Ike Kanji, Yamauchi Haruki, and Sudou Ken

---

It would concern the difference between genders but speaking as a man, where would our final goal lie?

If you ask for the opinions of men around the world, there you will probably see the true purpose of a man's life emerging.

In other words, to be intertwined with a loved one, leave behind offspring and deliver them to the next generation. That conclusion should be made.

In recent years, though, it has been overflowing with various entertainment. Starting from amusement parks and movies then to social games and virtual games. Entertainment meant to allow a person to have fun has been progressing rapidly.

But looking at it from the long history of humanity, this is still very shallow.

The prosperity of one's offspring is an act that almost all living creatures have conducted since ancient times.

However, for boys who had just risen up to high school, they could not aim for something like the prosperity of their offspring. They would just aim for the pleasure and sexual gratification that's in front of them.

."..now, I'd like to conduct a strategic meeting regarding Operation Delta."

Under assault by the moldering heat, Class D's Ike was sitting in an unfitting seiza position and making a clenched fist on top of his knees.

Wiping the ball-like sweat that had formed on his forehead with his fist, his forehead gleamed stickily.

"This time, I'm thinking of betting all of my youth this summer on Operation Delta. Haruki, how about you?"

"I feel the same way, Kanji. If this operation succeeds, I wouldn't even mind dying!"

Towards that resolve to even throw away one's life without hesitation, Sudou who had been watching until now approved.

"To be honest, I'm against it. I'll decide whether or not to join after I hear you out."

Even though those three individually differ in their way of thinking, the goal they are seeking is the same.

It seems they're optimistically thinking. Perhaps it's because we were all sweating, but I could feel the temperature in the room become even more humidly hot.

"So Ayanokouji.....obviously you're in too, right?"

"Before that, is it ok if I turn on the air conditioner?"

Nothing good will come about if this room smells of sweat any further.

".....guess so. It's hot."

If that's the case, I'd have liked to have the air conditioner turned on from the start. It's only uncomfortable for me who offered the room in the first place.

"Always, all the time, why is it always my room?"

"Didn't I tell you before? It's because your room is the tidiest one. The other rooms have tissues and frizzy hairs strewn about and it's all dirty. At Yamauchi's place, there's not even enough room to set foot in."

"Sudou's room's the same too right? Clothes and underwear all scattered about."

I don't care whose room is messy, if that's the case, I'd like them to think about tidying it up.

"No matter how long it's been, this room doesn't have a feeling of life to it. Ever since enrollment, nothing about it's changed. Points will be coming in soon so how about buying something?"

"Then next would be the carpet, you know, the carpet. My ass is hurting."

Sudou once again said something similar to what he's said in the past as he hits the floor.

"It's because I can't afford to wastefully spend precious points."

As I suitably dealt with him, for some reason, Sudou doggedly opposed me.

"In the uninhabited island test, we obtained those points

thanks to Suzune. It's really out of line for someone as useless as you to save up those points." Sudou told me.

"Indeed, indeed. Matter of fact, if Horikita were here with us, isn't it only a matter of time before we rise up to Class C?"

From the desperate situation in May, we've made a complete turn and are hounding the upper classes in terms of points with a vigorous surge.

"Come on, let's think about the difficult stuff when the second semester starts. Right now, it's Operation Delta."

"Are you guys serious?"

"I'm really serious. I mean, our youth lies there, right? Or are you saying you have an objection against the Operation Delta which is our supreme goal!"

Right now, the 3 Idiots have gathered in my room and are heatedly discussing Operation Delta. The cause of that is a certain plan that was discussed over the chat the night before.

"You're free to name the plan whatever you want like Delta, but basically it's just peeping right?"

That's right.

This plan called Delta has a respectful name indeed but the content of it was about peeping. It was a truly pointless thing born from the lust of males who wished to see the girls naked.

But no one other than Ike knows the details of it yet.

"To peep at a girl's naked body.....what's wrong with it?

That is the youth!"

It's not about wrong or not, it's a crime, a terrifying one.

However, this man boldly became defiant. Using the word youth. If he were to be discovered peeping, it wouldn't be strange even if he were reported as Boy A.

"What are you planning on doing if the girls find out? It won't just end with them being angry, you know."

The method of peeping is still unknown but there should be no doubt that it carries risk. I try to do what I could to discourage them.

It seems Sudou has also caught onto that as he presses the same question onto Ike and Yamauchi who were attempting to continue with it recklessly.

"Just like Ayanokouji said, it's dangerous. It's not like changing into gym clothes back in elementary school or like peeping in on the bath of an old inn during a middle school excursion."

"Don't fret. There are no oversights in the idea of this Ike Kanji-sama who's called a supercomputer."

As he stood up, Ike began to triumphantly explain the basis behind his confidence.

"Where and how will we be peeping, you guys are curious about that right? It's ok, I've properly thought it out. That's why firstly, calm down and please listen to what I have to say. First and foremost, we'll be carefully selecting our target. Even though it's our one and only chance, it would be a waste

if we half-assedly ended up peeping on someone ugly. Naturally, we'll be choosing from amongst the Class D girls. It's only by seeing the naked body of a cute girl whose normally close to you that you can feel maximum arousal."

"Of course, I agree with you too but we haven't raised those Mufufu Flags, you know?"

"If we don't have them, we can simply make them ourselves. Flags are something we have to raise for ourselves."

Using his index finger to operate his phone, Ike then pointed its screen towards us.

"Haven't you forgotten something? That ever since yesterday, the meeting for the big event called the pool release has been held!"

"O, ohh? Indeed if that's the case, we can peep!.....can we? I've never gone there before, the pool here."

As I looked towards the characters written on the phone, indeed I could see the matter regarding the pool release written there.

That only for the last 3 days of the summer vacation, the special swimming facility used by the swimming club can be used. It seems for those 3 days, from 9 am to 5 pm the pool will be open.

Indeed if it's that place, men and women alike, if they are to swim, everyone must get naked at least once but.....

"I can understand why you'd invite them to the pool to

peep on them but I don't think that's enough to peep on them."

I expressed my opinion frankly.

I've never entered the special swimming facility before but surveillance cameras should be installed as a matter-of-fact there.

Naturally, the surveillance cameras won't be installed inside the changing rooms themselves, but it wouldn't be surprising if they were installed in the corridor just outside the changing rooms.

If a suspicious male were to approach the girls' changing room, being immediately found out is an inevitability.

Ike, whose arms were crossed, had a composed expression which did not falter. On the other hand, ahead of time Yamauchi seemed to have become anxious.

"This makes me sad. Do you really take me for a fool who didn't even think of that? As for me, I've made preliminary arrangements for who knows how many days already for this day to come, I'm telling you."

In response to my questions criticizing him, Ike remained unperturbed. Rather than being perturbed, he, in fact, seemed composed.

"Preliminary arrangements? Then tell me the all-important peeping method."

No longer able to stand Ike who was putting on airs, Yamauchi cut in and asked that.

"You already want spoilers? Fine then, look upon this."

"If it's this, it should be the size to fit into the vent. After that, we just have to use the camera installed on the radio controlled car and advance through the vent while checking it out. What's more, you can even save images on the mini card of the radio controlled car's main unit!"

The plan Ike thought of had a deep darkness and was steeped in lust.....I wonder what terrifying thing this man would think of.

This is completely a criminal action. Thank you. If it's this, even Yamauchi would object to it---

"Ohh! This is amazing! If it's this, it's perfect! Right Ken!?"

So will he approve.....and with such an extremely light heart, all he could do was interject.

"I guess so....doesn't it feel like something straight out of a drama?"

"How's that---!? It's perfect isn't it!?"

Indeed, if it's with this, there's the possibility of making it to the destination without being found out but.....even so, the preparations are very meticulous. Therefore I made a single hypothesis.

"Could it be, this peeping, the Professor's also taking part in it?"

I can hardly believe it's a plan Ike thought of alone. A radio controlled car, too, isn't something at a price that's bought

easily.

"H-How did you!?"

How or anything, from the meticulous planning to the existence of the radio controlled car, none of it's like Ike. And besides, the location of the surveillance cameras and the ventilation route, for instance, would require a knowledgeable person to investigate in order to find out.

"Shit, if it's out then can't help it. That's right, I asked Professor. Damn, after all the trouble I went to to make you think I planned it all out."

"So? What's the detailed plan for that designated day?"

As I thought, he seems to have borrowed the Professor's knowledge. Just as I had marked it off, Ike began to explain.

"First of all, we'll invite the girls we want to peep on to the pool tomorrow. And then, we'll all mostly simultaneously enter the changing room right? Once we enter, we'll immediately rush over to the vent in the far back. If there's someone using it then Sudou, you threaten them if you have to and get them to move. And right after that, we'll pull out the towels as if to change and form a human wall around the vent so no one can see. Then, I'll hurry up and remove the hatch to the vent and insert the radio controlled car. I'll operate it so in order for no one to see me you guys please hide me. After that, we'll operate the radio controlled car and stop right in front of the girls' changing room and start recording. Once we've decided that they've finished changing we'll pull it back out."

The flow of it was more or less simple and therefore it was

easy to understand. But there were some haphazardly said places I could not wipe away.

"I threaten the ones in our way and get them out of our way. Or make sure the ones coming closer to us don't do so right?"

It could be said to be an appropriate role for Sudou. Because they know him to be aggressive, the other students won't carelessly draw near either.

"You get it? The brilliance of this Operation Delta."

"B-But you know, Kanji. This is a crime right.....how should I put it it's like the weight of the sin is heavier than the peeping....."

"Indeed this is a crime. Strictly speaking. But you guys look back on your past. You should have committed a similar crime, you know?"

"Ahh? What's that supposed to mean? I've never committed a crime?"

"Then I'll ask you this, Ken. If you use violence to hurt a person, that's a crime, right? If an adult punches someone out, it'll be on the television news, right? You're using violence."

"That's.....fighting and violence are different, right?"

"Unfortunately, I've never once used violence."

"Then Haruki, back during elementary school, didn't you lick the flute of the girl you liked or sniffed your gym clothes?

You absolutely didn't do that sort of thing?"

"Uuuuu....."

I don't know if that hit the mark or not, but Yamauchi seems to recall something like that.

"If an adult does the same thing? That's a crime!"

"I-Indeed."

"In other words, both peeping and filming it, as long as you're still underage it'll be forgiven. If we don't do it now when will we do it!"

That enthusiasm, without a doubt, struck the hearts of Yamauchi and Sudou. It seems he had enough determination to make those two, who had been feeling guilt over the criminal act, harden their resolve too.

"Are you doing it, Haruki? Whatever happens, happens."

"Y-You're right. Alright, I'm in on Ike's plan."

"Are you guys really fine with it? It's a crime."

No matter how much you sugarcoat it, a crime is still a crime.

"I've been saying it for a while now, Ayanokouji. Licking a flute is a crime and peeping on someone directly changing is also a crime. If so, then filming that would also equally be a criminal act. But you know, this is youth. Boys peeping on girls changing, you won't get arrested for it, at most a warning. That's what I mean!"

"Well, it's not that I'm not convinced or anything. No matter how high tech the world becomes, boys all over the world more or less still become adults through such experiences. Shoplifting in elementary school and shoplifting in high school, both sins carry the same weight."

This is no longer even about seeing the girls changing, he's just forcibly trying to justify his actions.

"Unwillingly giving in, let's say keeping pace with this high tech era, peeping is also filming. But you know, if that's found out, even if you don't get arrested, it's plenty enough to get you expelled you know?"

"I'm scared of expulsion, like hell I'd peep!"

Ohh---! Sudou and Yamauchi both lifted their arms as such.

"All that's left is you, Ayanokouji. We've come this far, obviously you'll be cooperating, right?"

".....I can't deny my interest."

"That's why your cooperation is there. If the three of you become a wall, we definitely won't be found out."

His eyes are serious.

Even if I back out here, it seems he's resolved to absolutely pull it off here.

"I understand. I'll cooperate. But promise me one thing, Ike. This plan's accompanied by a great risk. If we're discovered, it won't end simply. That's why, whether we

succeed or fail, please promise me this is the only time you'll do something like this. If not I won't cooperate, and depending on the case, I'll report this to the school."

I spoke while mixing strict words with gentle words.

By doing so, I'm aiming to draw forth a compromise from Ike. If I just one-sidedly object, there's the possibility that Ike and the others will simply shut up and commit a criminal act.

That's why, as a condition for my cooperation, I placed the condition that this be a one-time thing. There's no mistaking though that if we're discovered, Class D might end up collapsing. That is something everyone here should understand.

"I'm telling you I understand. I too, don't think it's good to do something like this multiple times."

"Then that's fine. Because I understand you'll be betting your student's youth to challenge this."

"Let me propose something. If the pool opens at 9 o'clock then going there by matching that timing is most certain. If we're there first, then taking the innermost part of the changing room for ourselves is also a simple matter."

"I see! Let's use that! A male student's youth is peeping! Let's do this!"

This is a conversation that took place the day before the pool, the full story behind Operation Delta.

* * *

Then, on the day we went to the pool, we were the first ones to enter the changing room and occupied its far back and spread out our towels.

The boys who continued to enter one after another were chatting away with various emotions and did not pay any attention to us.

"Hurry it up, Ike."

While spreading his towel and pretending to change, Sudou urged on the Ike who was crouching down in front of the vent.

Ike firstly brought out the radio controlled car and the driver set that was wrapped in a bath towel, then removed the metal fixings attached to the entrance of the underfloor vent. Then he quickly activated the radio controlled car and started to operate it.

The small machine equipped with a penlight, while transmitting the path to the monitor, proceeds forward.

"S-Shit! As expected, it's dark!"

If it's only the penlight lighting the path, the ventilation opening is far too dark and the visibility on the monitor got worse.

But even so, the radio controlled car proceeded forward bit by bit towards the bright light up ahead that was closing in. Even if we ended up going too far, since there were bars in place to stop the car there was no danger of falling. But even so, out of caution we moved the car forward at a slow speed.

"Alright, a little bit further and the visibility should clear up---!"

The changing room was now reflected on the monitor. And although the quality of the image was crude, the figures of Horikita and the others could be seen on the monitor.

"U-Uhyou!"

It could be said that Ike's (Professor's) plan had brilliantly succeeded.

On the monitor, the figures of the Class D students, as well as Ichinose, were clearly captured. Right now, the radio controlled car should be properly recording it all.

If one looks at the monitor, one can witness them changing their clothes in real time.

"Ohh, show me too, Kanji. I can't see properly."

"You idiot, show me too."

Sudou and Yamauchi, seemingly dissatisfied, presses Ike to show them the monitor too. But if they keep this up, there's no avoiding drawing suspicion from the other boys. I decided to make use of that.

"You're recording it, so isn't it better to not overdo it? You're about to draw suspicion."

"Kuu, y-you're right. For now, it's better to change....." Clicking his tongue and seeming frustrated, Yamauchi grimaced.

That's right, even without peeping through the monitor, it's currently being recorded in advance on the mini card that's installed on the radio controlled car.

Resisting the temptation to pull back the radio controlled car, Ike endures.

Pushing the controller along with his baggage into the locker, he focused on changing.

"H-how many minutes should I wait I wonder....."

"I'd like to keep it there for 20 minutes. At the very least....."

It's necessary to avoid ending it too quickly and unable to hold down the changing scene as well as leaving it too long on the contrary and being unable to recover it.

On top of that, if we delay changing for too long, that could also lead to trouble. Probably for these guys, this is going to be the longest 20 minutes of their lives.

"I'll be going ahead."

"W-Wait a minute, Ayanokouji! Are you betraying us!? If you ask us to show you afterward, we won't show you!"

"That's not it. If 20 minutes goes by and not a single boy comes out, then the others will get suspicious."

"Uuu, I guess that's also true.....then go do that properly, get it?"

"I know."

Leaving behind the 3 who were recovering the radio controlled car, I went ahead of the others in heading towards the pool.

* * *

On the other hand, at the same time I left the men's changing room.

In the girls' changing room, an ideal sight that the 3 Idiots so desired was able to unfold. No, in fact the camera was properly capturing both the sound and the images.

"This is kind of fresh isn't it, to be using the school's pool outside of classes."

As she puts her bag inside the locker, Kushida says that.

Ichinose, who was changing beside her, quickly reached out with her hands towards her clothes.

"That's right---. It feels like coming to a public pool to play."

"Ichinose-san, you have such amazing proportions....."

Sighing like she was able to fall in love, Kushida says that.

Seemingly a little shy, Ichinose looks at Kushida's frame and said the same thing convincingly.

"Kushida-san too, your body is very well-balanced, I don't think you'd lose out to someone like me."

As a matter of fact, although in terms of breast size tactics, Ichinose's is larger, in terms of integrating it she doesn't lose

out either.

On the other hand, Sakura, who has the same bust size as Ichinose if not greater than her, slightly took her distance from those two and began to change.

Even amongst those of the same gender, her sense of embarrassment is strong. And besides, thinking that she'll be going to the poolside after this, it couldn't be helped even if her body becomes heavy.

Unlike classes, though, her one salvation was that she could wear a rash guard that would completely hide her upper body. For someone of the shy type like Sakura, that item would truly be like a savior.

"Ichinose-san, could you please not stare at me?"

Receiving a passionate gaze like that from Ichinose, Horikita felt a sense of revulsion.

Putting a hold on changing, she took her distance.

"No, sorry sorry. How should I put it, I was just thinking Horikita-san's skin is so pretty and transparent and ended up staring. As fellow girls, really I'd end up paying attention to a cute girl. Kikyo-chan thinks so too right?"

"Yeah, Horikita-san is extremely cute after all....."

."....."

Horikita changes while sighing at Kushida's one word.

"But still, you came together with us today. I thought you

wouldn't show your face at events like this."

"Indeed I'm not here because I like it. But sometimes, irrespective of one's own will, there are times when I just have to accept it."

"Hmm, so? You're saying quite a lot of confusing things, Horikita-san."

Naturally, she cannot speak the details to anyone else.

Since the fact that her arm was stuck inside a water bottle and she could not take it out was a disgrace she'll be taking to her grave. The very fact that Ayanokouji learned about this was an intense regret for her.

Why did she panic at that time and ended up calling him, she was in the midst of reflecting on it.

"Why don't you change without talking to me?"

Having been lightly dealt with by Horikita like that, Ichinose eyes her next target.

That was the existence of Sakura who was changing stealthily in the back. For Ichinose, who treasures the idea of "All for One and One for All", her feeling of wanting to get along with everyone equally was strong.

She was thinking of getting along even with the Sakura whose existence was clearly floating all on its own. Even though Ichinose did not know the internal state of Class D, she understood that Sakura was a student who should be treated preciously. Getting deeply involved with her was out of the question, but she also could not completely ignore her.

Both Kushida and Horikita, fearing they'd do something thoughtless, did not talk to Sakura.

At first glance, she seems to be the introverted and mature type. But according to Ichinose's analysis, Sakura was the shy type but towards the people she gets along with, there was the feeling that she'd open her heart up to them and talk with them as well. So she then thought if that was the case, there should be the chance she could become a friend to her as well.

"It's been a while since I've met Sakura-san like this, hasn't it? Looks like since we're both from different classes, we can't meet as often---."

"T-That's right....."

"Honami-chan knows Sakura-san, that's a bit surprising."

Feeling doubt regarding the relationship of those two, Kushida asks that slightly reservedly.

"We know each other from a while back. Right---?"

"Y-Yes....."

Feeling more rigid than expected, Sakura said that while avoiding eye contact. Towards that shy gesture, Ichinose inquires but she bears with it.

"But even so....."

To an extent where it could not be considered rude, Ichinose looks at Sakura's body.

Cute features and slender yet a well-padded body, and more than anything else, those large breasts of hers were like those of an idol featured on a page.

She ended up looking at that body with a gaze similar to that of a male's. Sakura, who's the type of girl one would want to protect, feels like she could become the most popular girl across the school year if only she were to become a bit more cheerful.

"Speaking of which Honami-chan, today Kanzaki-kun's also here but about that, could you tell me a little more?"

"Nya? What about Kanzaki-kun?"

Ichinose, who was measuring her distance from Sakura, received such a talk from Kushida and shifted her gaze.

Having judged that to be her chance at escaping, Sakura slightly took her distance from Ichinose.

"There's a girl in our class who's interested in Kanzaki-kun, you see. I wanted to ask how things are regarding that topic."

"Wow, Kanzaki-kun's surprisingly popular. There's also a girl in our class who seems to like him. Ahh, but right now none of us should have anyone like that, right?"

"I see, then I'll tell her to consider calling out to him."

"Yeah, yeah. Kanzaki-kun might also be happy about that. Probably, though."

"Probably, huh."

Towards that loose answer, Kushida laughs.

"He's pretty reticent, or how should I put it, he's a man of few words. That in itself is fine but he lacks assertion way too much and I don't understand him very well, you see."

That was her frank assessment of him as a fellow classmate.

"That's right, I guess. He seems like he's hard to understand."

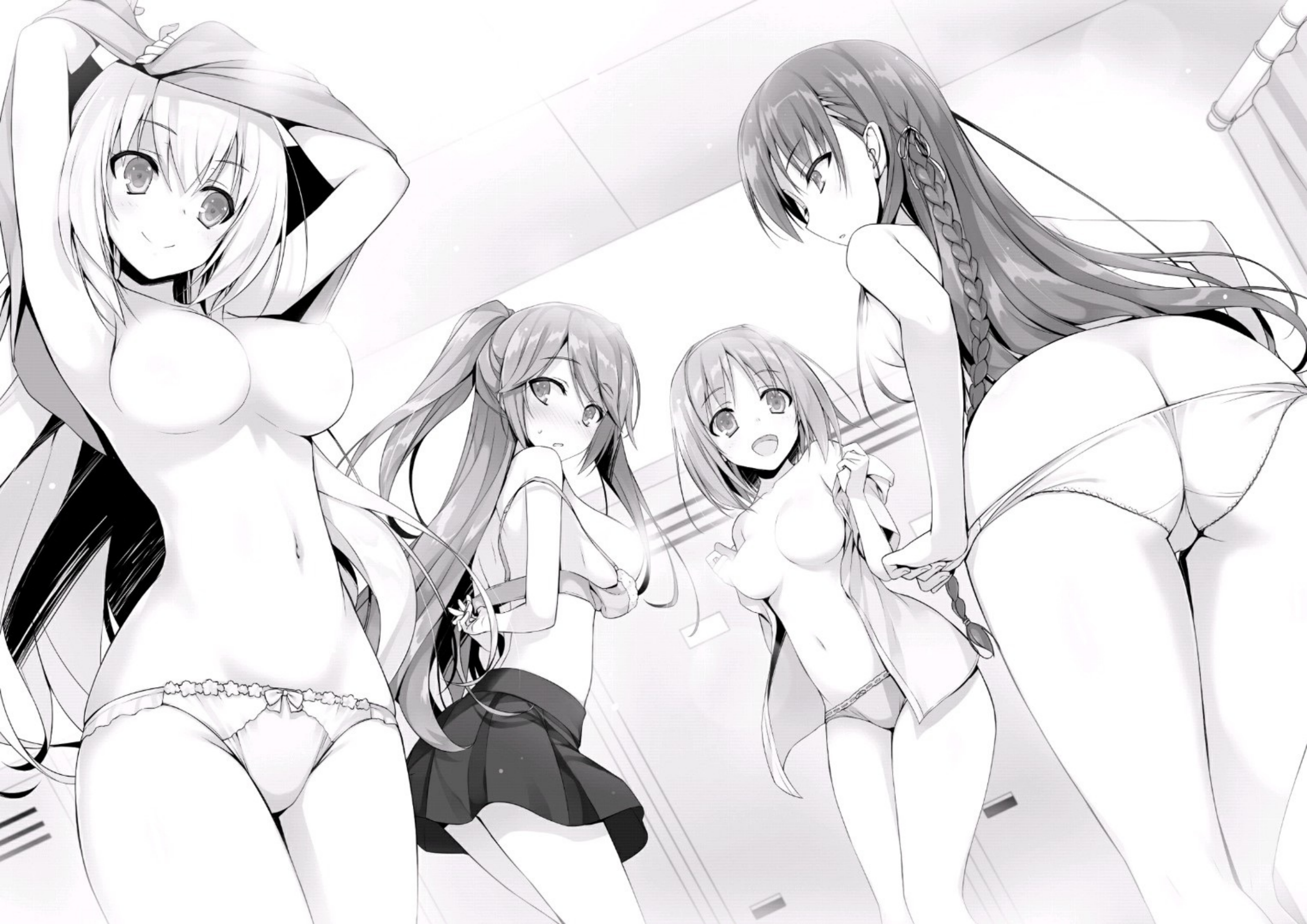
Just as they were beginning to talk excitedly, their surroundings had already reached out for the swimsuits they were supposed to be changing into.

"Woah, we need to change."

Ichinose quickly takes off her clothes belatedly. It was an agile movement reminiscent of the changing of boys.

Her breasts sway.

Even Horikita, who had been trying not to show any interest, had her gaze stolen away for a moment.



Those outstanding proportions with such destructive power, as long as she possesses those, she could one hit KO the majority of men.

Recently our diet had shifted to a more Western one, but even so, it was still hard to imagine that body is that of someone who's also a 1st year high schooler.

"....you, those breasts, since when?"

"Fue? When, do you mean when they became big? I guess it was around my 3rd year in middle school. They just kept growing, you see. Why do you ask?"

"No, I can understand now. The reason you're feeling overwhelmed."

It's not by any means absolute, however, there is a timing where girls are unable to cope with their own changes. At times, the development of one's breasts is something one might not be able to read.

It couldn't be helped if such rapid growth occurred in under a year. She answered like that.

Horikita glanced sideways at Kushida just once but there was no response to those words. Of course, it's not like Kushida thinking anything by it. It's just Kushida said this in a simple, straightforward manner.

This time it's not towards Horikita but to the new arrival.

"Hmm, Karuizawa-san? Hello---, you two also came here to play."

Kushida, who was always sensitive to the circumstances of her surroundings, turned to face Karuizawa and the two other girls who entered the changing room.

"What a coincidence. We also came here to swim."

"Heh....."

Kushida could not hide her surprise. It was because normally in classes, Karuizawa would never swim.

Karuizawa and the others headed towards the locker at the far end. Feeling apprehensive towards it, Kushida nevertheless continued changing.

"Uwa.....they're really doing it. They're really scummy perverts, the lot of them....."

She found the radio controlled car that came to a stop after getting entangled in the metal fixtures of the underfloor vent entrance.

The gleaming lens was capturing the girls' changing room from a brilliant angle.

Normally, the metal fixtures could be removed by almost anyone, but to remove it it would require a bit of effort and time. Because it was fixed in all directions with a Phillips screwdriver, one would need to remove those fixings first.

But Karuizawa touched the metal fixtures and by easily pulling it back, removed it.

It wasn't because she had superhuman strength nor was it because she excelled in regards to her screwdriver skills. It

was only because yesterday, someone had set foot in the changing room and removed the screws. It was because the metal fixture, even without the screws, could easily be put into place.

Karuizawa holds down the radio controlled car with her hands, and lifts it up.

The lamp beside the monitor was lightly glowing red and it could be seen that it was in the middle of recording. Then, using the technique taught to her by Ayanokouji, she removed the mini card from the radio controlled car.

At that very moment, the recording stopped functioning and if the process for recording is not followed through again, the recording lamp will not work.

Then inserting a new mini card with no data on it, she returned it to the underfloor vent entrance.

"And this does it."

After that, just by letting time pass, the radio controlled car will return.

"……he's the only one, who's proper……."

While feeling exasperated about the scumminess of the males, she thought about the only one who acted to stop this from happening, Ayanokouji.

If Ayanokouji had been complicit in this peeping, or had pretended to not see anything, both classmates and outside parties, without even knowing, would have had their naked bodies be seen. And on top of that, it would remain as data

forever.

"Kei-chan, is it fine now?"

Saying that from behind Karuizawa was her fellow classmate Sonoda. And then, Ishikura also looked at Karuizawa with an uneasy expression.

"Ahh yeah, thanks. It's fine now."

Inside the changing room where the 1st year girls are all jumbled together, if she alone looks down at the underfloor vent entrance it would be blatantly suspicious. Just like how Ike and the others formed a barricade, Karuizawa also used her close friends to block the field of view.

Naturally, since all the lockers near the vent entrance have all been marked as being 'In Use', she didn't forget to use keys to lock them all to make them unusable.

Using the eyes of others, Karuizawa without raising her own heartrate, calmly returned each and every one of those keys. She did not explain the details to her close friends Sonoda and Ishikura.

People who, even without an explanation, will obediently follow instructions and can be held in confidence to not reveal a thing.....people who are by no means strong-willed, in addition to fearing ostracism. Such students were selected.

Having finished changing and having confirmed that all her acquaintances from Class D are no longer present, Karuizawa spoke words of gratitude towards those two.

"Thanks for cooperating with me today. I have some

business to take care of afterward, but the two of you will be playing here?"

"Ahh, yeah. We were thinking of doing that. Right?"

The two of them nod towards each other. In regards to that, Karuizawa also did not seem to have any intention of saying anything.

* * *

Having returned from the pool after playing until exhaustion, I returned back to my front door. And when I did, in front of my room, the 3 of them were already there on standby looking excited.

"You're late, Ayanokouji! Hurry up and open it!"

Sudou who had run out of patience, kicks the door. But I'd like him to stop because it would bother the people in the neighboring rooms as well as draw the attention of the dorm manager.

"Hurry it up, Ayanokouji!"

I was made to open the door to my own room by a bunch of males who were unable to repress their arousal pushing my back.

In the hands of Ike and the others was the card they were able to recover from the radio controlled car. And recorded on it would unmistakably be the raw images of the girls changing. Those 3 were thinking that.

Entering my room before the resident himself entered,

they turned on my computer without permission.

"I-If something incredible is displayed here, you'll let me copy it afterward right....."

"You guys, wait a minute. First of all, I have to confirm it, because you guys have no right to see Suzune's naked body."

"Calm down, both of you. Here we all need to get along. Guhehehehe."

It seems they're no longer even considering me, because they were impatiently waiting for the computer to turn on.

Since it was a tiring day in various ways, I sat down on my bed just like that.

"If you'll give it back to me after checking the contents that'll be a great help."

"What're you getting at, Ayanokouji, acting all mature on your own. You also want to see right?"

"If you're going to turn back, I feel like now's the time."

"Ahh, I see. If you're going to act like a good boy and all, don't even think about looking alright? More like, I won't be showing it to you."

Standing in front of the computer screen, Ike spread out both his hands as though he were blocking the view.

"There's no bastard who's not interested in a woman's naked body. Be honest."

From Sudou, who was already relaxing as though it were

his own home, words like that came at me, but I don't feel the need to see a girl's naked body that desperately. At the very least, I don't feel like it was worth risking expulsion over.

"Nuwaa!? Why, why, why is nothing showing up!!!"

Upon reading the mini card that they thought was borrowed from Professor, there was no data at all inside.

In other words, the recording from the radio controlled car never functioned properly in the first place.

"N-Nothing. The data....."

"There's no way that can be true, right? I-I mean, we properly managed to record it right? Right?"

The 3 of them panicked and opened the folder many times over, but there was nothing at all there.

That much is obvious. The card that had the recorded data in it was taken out by Karuizawa and she replaced it with an empty card.

No matter how hard they look for it, there's no finding a file that does not exist. On the other hand, the real data had already been destroyed and as such no longer remains in existence.

"Why is it not thereeeeeeeeeeeee!!!"

And just like that, the ambition of the 3 Idiots was snuffed out due to internal sabotage.

Swimsuit SS: Horikita Suzune

The spectacular swimming pool during the summer holiday. Many students had come here in order to refresh themselves.

The scene showed the majority of the students playing, but there was one girl...

Horikita Suzune, who was on the diving platform of the starting point, watched perfectly straight at the finishing line, and she slowly jumped into the azure water.

That form was excessively beautiful, to the point that I didn't hear any sound. I observed Horikita's swimming form firmly.

She seems like she's planning to go back and forth, since she rapidly turned around at the finishing line.

I was in the starting point, checking the time while waiting for the return of Horikita. After getting her hand up, Horikita lifted up her head from the water.

"Yo! Well done."

"..."

Horikita looked down at me and sighed slightly.

After that, she swam slowly to the ladder and grabbed it.

"Did you see it?"

She asked me while climbed the ladder.

"More or less. You are the only one who would swim seriously in the pool during summer vacation."

The majority of the students were sprinkling water, playing with a ball or a float, only thinking about playing happily.

"I didn’t come here just to play."

She told me, looking a bit angry.

"What are you doing? What did I do to you?"

"Do you want me to say it? That you threatened me and brought me to the swimming pool?"

"Don’t use the word threaten, that sounds unpleasant. I hope you can correct that."

"...Forget about it. There are not many opportunities to practice swimming after all, so this is good too."

It looks like she has used this optimistic way of thinking to stabilize her emotions.

"You were already good at swimming. You shouldn’t need to practice."

Horikita has managed to get outstanding grades in swimming and other sport subjects. The school has probably given her full marks. Even so, why isn’t she thinking about anything but increasing her skills?

"What’s your goal?"

After I asked her, Horikita stayed silent for a moment. She glared at me a moment.

"You are not playing, but you aren't practicing either. What are you doing here?"

Even if you ask me, it's hard for me to answer. The moment others ask you "what are you doing here", what's the correct way to answer that?

"I'm observing mankind. Just by watching you, Horikita, I'm already not bored."

"...can you not say nauseating things?"

She moved blatantly her line of sight and sighed. It's just that she should already know I was not being serious.

"This is surprisingly interesting. Even though there are a lot of students here, only you are standing out."

Horikita, exuding an aura of "I don't have friends" while swimming in the vast swimming pool. Wrong, it's more accurate to say she was exuding an aura of "I don't need friends".

"How about you also try to swim a bit? It could clear your head."

"Don't use the "cool down your brain" type of excuse to push on the topic."

"Anyways, can you step aside from there? I can't climb up..."

"Sorry" – I said this while I slightly moved away from the ladder.

Horikita climbed through the side of the pool. With her head inclined a bit, she cleaned up the water from her ears. Really, if this person didn't speak, she would be a beauty.

"Right now you were thinking of unnecessary things, weren't you?"

"You are imagining things."

I said this in order to deceive her and looked at her voluntarily.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you have asked me before what's my goal, right?"

"Eh? Yeah, What's wrong with that question?"

"... Because I no longer want to experience again sad feelings that I consider unnecessary."

Horikita's real thoughts came out in a split second. This was also the proof that Horikita also realized her weak points.

"Don't worry. You are not a person who would defeated easily."

"Isn't that obvious? I don't need you to tell me that."

Horikita immediately took back to her heart that instant of weakness she showed, and passed over my side.

Probably, the reason I paid attention to Horikita's since I enrolled in this school is --

Swimsuit SS: Kushida Kikyo

That girl was getting a lot of attention from everyone.

"Kikyo-chan, since you still don't have a boyfriend, what do you think about dating me?"

A male student approached the young lady and told her sweet words.

It looked exactly like a scene of hitting on someone in the beach during summer.

"Ahaha, I might not have a boyfriend yet... but I'm not the type of person who's that popular."

Even though she answered using socially polite words, the truth is, she is very popular among the guys. No matter who they are, she always treats them brightly and gently. This is the speciality of the girl called Kushida Kikyo.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun. These situations where I get talked are happening a lot."

Kushida told me this with a bitter smile while looking bewildered.

I was spending with this popular person –Kushida, the last day of the summer vacation. More precisely, we weren't just 2 people, but the group included Ike and Horikita and the others, who had come to play to the swimming pool.

It was just that when I acted alone, I got the opportunity to

spend time alone with Kushida by chance. Kushida came at the corner of the pool and sat down. She only introduced her feet in the pool.

"Ayanokouji-kun, do you also want to copy me?"

"No, it's okay."

"It's going to be the 2nd term soon~."

"...Yeah."

My answer to these commonly used lines in conversations were extremely short, totally in the line of someone with bad social skills like me. If my vocabulary were richer, then I could brighten the atmosphere...

Among the girls I'm acquainted with in the school, I'm constantly unable to get rid of my nervousness with Kushida.

Kushida not only hates Horikita, but she also hates me. Even so, I'm still unable to get rid of the feeling of nervousness. It's probably as simple as I treat her as someone of the opposite sex.

As for whether I like her romantically, I'm unable to deny that this situation isn't one step away from that feeling.

If I were to be confessed by her, I would certainly accept her confession –even though it's not very likely to happen.

"In fact, Kushida, you are very popular."

I didn't intend to say it, but I inadvertently did it. Although I said it with a low voice, but it still reached Kushida's ears.

She looked at me with an incredible expression.

"I’m not popular. Not at all."

"No, you have just been confessed a moment ago."

"That wasn’t much a confession as... it was sort of an extension of the greeting?"

So recently, youngsters sneak confessions in their extended greetings. I totally believe I will never be able to say those words with an indifferent face, until the day I die.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you are placed very high in the secret rankings, you must’ve been confessed, right?"

"There has never been any indication of that."

Who has ranked me so high? I can’t imagine it.

"For example, like Horikita."

"Eh?"

"No, I was thinking if you have received Horikita-san’s confession."

I believe I had revealed an incredible and difficult to understand expression that came from the bottom of my heart.

"That’s impossible. Whether it’s her confessing to me, or me confessing to her."

I denied it bluntly.

Why would Kushida ask me that? Sometimes, I don’t really understand this Kushida girl.

Kushida immediately detected the changing atmosphere and said this while shaking her head a bit.

"Forget about my previous words. I’m sorry."

"It’s not a big deal."

I didn’t know why but I was unable to keep looking at Kushida’s face when I talked to her.

Until the rest of my friends came to talk to me, Kushida and I watched silently the waving surface of the swimming pool.

Swimsuit SS: Ichinose Honami

In the last day of the summer vacation, I came to the swimming pool to enjoy myself. After having lunch, I was resting alone.

I was sitting on a simple bench placed in a corner of the swimming pool, watching attentively at the students who continued to swim without taking a break.

"If you don’t mind it, do you want to swim with me?"

The leader of Class B, Ichinose Honami, started a conversation with me, who was resting there.

"Did you talk to me because you saw me being alone?"

"Ahaha, it’s not like that. I just minded it a bit."

It was an honor to be told this by Ichinose, who was considered cute (probably) in the campus.

--Of course, I couldn’t say these words aloud, so I just thought it in my head.

"I’m not really good at swimming."

"Is that true?"

After answering her, Ichinose looked incredulously at my top, then she watched attentively at my legs.

"You look as if you could swim very fast."

"That’s just your misconception. I’m always one of the slowest in class."

I told her that since it was an information that could be obtained by investigating a bit.

Ichinose, although she didn’t really agree, immediately switched the mood and stretched her lower back.

"Then you don’t have to swim. First let’s just enter the pool."

"Oh, ok."

Since it was a rare occasion to come here once – I held this idea for the time being.

Normally they wouldn’t allow entering the pool wearing a top, but today was a special day.

We did a warm-up standing side by side and after that, we entered the pool. The ice-cold temperature of the swimming pool was transmitted through my skin.

"Ah~ so comfortable~"

Ichinose, who immediately emerged, waved me with a smile on her face.

The next moment she splashed me with the water from the pool.

"...Hey."

"Ahahaha!"

Was because I looked weird with my hair wet from the water she poured?

Ichinose pointed at me while she split her sides laughing. Following that, she splashed even more water than the previous time at me.

"Is it okay for you not to offer any resistance?"

"You—"

Being provoked like this, you'd also want to strike back. But when I realized the surroundings looking at me, I became rigid.

"What happened?"

"Ah, nothing..."

How should I put it... this practically looks like lovers playing in the swimming pool.

Even though Ichinose and I don't have that kind of relationship, those who saw us interacting would definitely think like that.

Once I reflected about it, my body felt heavy and I was unable to strike back.

"It's just that I want to do Bloodless Surrender..."

I used an idiom as an excuse.

The meaning of Bloodless Surrender is literal. Avoiding a bloody battle when being attacked by opening the city gates.

"I see~ but it’s too bad, there will be blood."

Ichinose splashed me water ruthlessly. The water entered my eyes and my nose.

"Geh..."

I deduced it was useless. It was exhausting to only be attacked.

Ichinose probably felt that attacking unilaterally was excessive too. She was awakened a bit by a feeling of guilt and apologized to me with a smile.

After that, she told me she was going to the central part of the pool, so I followed her from behind.

Looking at her defenseless back, I absolutely couldn’t endure it, gathered a lot of water and splashed her in one go.

"Waaa! Sto- you are so sly!"

"I’m really sorry, it looks like I really hate being sprinkled with water. But now we are even, so don’t resent me, okay?"

"Haha, I’m not going to resent you. I’ll only strike back at you even stronger!"

I’m certain this interaction is already considered by the surroundings as one done by lovers, but only this time I intend not to care about it.

If Horikita saw this scene, she would definitely say "you are really a brat" and sigh. But I also want to become a brat once in a while.

Swimsuit SS: Sakura Airi

In the afternoon, even more students gathered in the pool, it was crowded everywhere.

Although we were a group of more than 10 people, when it was crowded, there would inevitably be people who got lost. So we temporarily disbanded and planned to gather again once the place was not that congested.

I believed the timing was perfect, so in order to act alone, I quietly moved away from Horikita and the others.

However, when I was ready to spend the time leisurely, someone pulled my arm.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun."

When I turned my head in order to follow the origin of the sound, Sakura was standing there looking at me concerned.

"There’s quite a lot of people..."

"Yeah, let's go to the corner."

Sakura and I are not good at coping with big crowds. If possible, I really didn’t want to be in the crowd. Sakura was also unlikely to reject it, so after I got her consent, we began to walk towards the windows of the facility.

"Ah, awa, please wait a moment! ...Puwa!"

After I heard a yelling, I turned around and saw Sakura,

who was almost getting swallowed by the crowd.

She desperately extended his hand toward me, but she still looked a bit polite. Since it looked interesting, I observed it for a moment.

Even though I obviously didn’t move a step, Sakura was more and more away from me. I believed if I kept doing nothing, it would be impossible to find Sakura later, so I approached her and grabbed her arm.

If Sakura had her skin exposed, her resistance would’ve been a bit stronger. It was fortunate that she was wearing a jacket.

"T-thank you."

"It was really dangerous."

In order not to get scattered with Sakura, we followed the wall.

"Are you not going to swim?"

"I’ll pass. And I’m not good at swimming... and you Ayanokouji-kun, are you not going to swim?"

She felt sorry that I was staying with her and looked cowered. Since there were a lot of people, her wariness was stronger than usual.

"I already swim during classes."

"But....."

"Am I causing you trouble by staying with you?"

"No, it's totally not like that! I'm happy, I'm very happy ..."

I decided to tease Sakura for answering like that. Of course, I did all this also for her sake.

"Then I'll just go swim a bit."

I called on Sakura to remove her top. Even if we entered the pool wearing that, we wouldn't be reprimanded, but I deliberately did that, in order to cut off Sakura's escape.

"Eeeeh...!?"

"With so many people here, it's not going to be conspicuous. After all, our inconspicuousness had been evaluated with high marks."

"That is, ah, although it's true..."

Sakura also knew her presence was nonexistent.

"But I'm very embarrassed..."

"Nobody is watching."

"A-Ayanokouji-kun is watching..."

So it was like that... this is really strange.

Then I said this while I moved away my gaze,

"I'll try my best not to look at you, is that okay?"

"I-I understand..."

Has she mustered enough courage? I heard sounds of

friction of her coat from behind.

Because I wasn’t looking, the sound felt very real, it kept resonating in my head, making me almost have strange feelings.

This is not okay, this is not okay – I shook my head to get rid of the worries.

"I-it’s done..."

"Then... let’s go."

"Yes...!"

I did not turn my head and I extended my hand backwards. In order not to get lost, Sakura, showing a slight concern, held my hand.

Facing this kind of strange situation, I couldn’t help but laugh a bit.

Swimsuit SS: Karuizawa Kei

"Hey, what's so funny?"

During the evening, Karuizawa said this while looking at the students who were returning to the changing rooms.

She was sitting near the window, her hair drenched, water droplets falling from her hair to the ground.

The reason of this was because, a moment ago, I pushed Karuizawa, who was unwilling to swim in the pool, to the water.

She looked as if she was going to vomit at any moment while looking at the students with contempt.

"You... Forget about it, it's not really anything, but if I really have to say it, you are also part of those people."

It could be said that Karuizawa had got the most female friends in the class. Weekdays and weekends she probably spent the time meeting with lots of friends to play everywhere.

"Only people like me who can't be in the limelight can look down at groups of people like those."

"Hey, although it might be like this..."

Karuizawa somewhat showed understanding, but she probably couldn't accept my words, so she kept speaking.

"Although I believe everybody thinks in the same way, they would have a negative attitude towards things that are outside of their scope of understanding. That is, what's called their inner perception, maybe? Isn't there some moments where you believe "this is absolutely the truth", right?"

Karuizawa voiced this speech, not because she wanted to show off.

Having seen her usual attitude, I had never thought that she would make such a reliable speech, so I couldn't help but gasp in admiration to these words.

"What, did I say something strange?"

"No... It's just that I have similar thoughts."

It's just that I never thought Karuizawa and I had these identical thoughts. With her outer appearance and her actions being so different, her inner being was very reliable. I guess that currently nobody apart from Hirata knows about this.

I did not look at her, but I raised a topic – that included her scar.

"I actually think I have a method to solve that."

Wearing a swimsuit does not imply showing the abdomen. Although it would require to pay close attention while changing clothes, that doesn't mean it couldn't be done.

In the event someone were to tease Karuizawa, the circumstances would not be the same, but I don't think anybody would pick a quarrel with her while changing clothes.

"It’s not only about this issue. I just simply dislike swimming in a public place. And my body would be completely exposed if I wore a swimsuit."

"So is it because you don’t have self-confidence?"

My statement was not malicious, but she probably interpreted them as if they were full of malice, so she returned the question to me.

"Don’t you know? Nowadays even grade schoolers don’t wear school swimsuits."

"Really?"

"Because right now you can wear any type of swimsuit."

In other words, just as bloomers disappeared with the time, school swimsuits were also removed.

"After all, even the trendy top I’m wearing right now is permitted."

However, this also showed that there were lots of suspicious elements.

"...is this because you wanted to see my swimsuit?"

"Don’t get the wrong idea. I was just thinking whether or not you had not played to your heart’s content."

After being told that by her, I suddenly realized I talked too much.

"Hmpf."

Karuizawa pretended not to hear this and shifted her line of sight to me.

"I feel that, although I'm not very sure, but perhaps it's a good thing that I'm able to communicate with you right now."

She seemed to be whispering to herself.

"Not only Hirata-kun, right now I still have friends around me. But I have been hiding my real self all the time, that's why, although I am also perplexed, but how should I put it, I feel at easy. If it was like usual, I would have never done this, but my heart wouldn't be able to refrain from thinking that it wouldn't be a bad thing to try to swim a bit, it's really unimaginable."

Even so, Karuizawa still didn't intend to stand up, this was because there was a clear-cut difference between the "things she could do" and the "things she couldn't do".

Karuizawa was shouldering a psychological wound and a physical scar, none of them could be easily cured.

This might be me overestimating my capabilities, but if my existence can bring healing to this person, then as a person, this is something worth being happy.

Afterword

It's been about 4 months. It's Kinugasa here.

Recently, I secretly attended a party where people from the gaming industry gather. There I met the president of a certain corporation and they told me "Ever since I was a student, I've been playing Kinugasa-san's games!" as a greeting and when he did, I felt the passage of time and was shocked.....Yeah, it's better not to dwell too deeply on that.....

In any case, this time the story is one that depicts the events during the remaining summer vacation that took place after the exam that occurred in volume 4. Parts without dialogue, the introduction of new characters for instance. And the story has also become a preliminary step towards the story of volume 5.

Again, the female lineup surrounding Ayanokouji has become more pronounced. There are those who have not yet gotten their development, and in the future from amongst them (or it might be a character that will be introduced in the future) perhaps a day will come when one of them will head in a direction where their relationship with Ayanokouji goes beyond friendship.

Furthermore, from the next volume onwards, at long last, developments involving Ayanokouji's past will slowly be told. The appearance of a new rival, a new special exam as well as situations hectically changing even more than before will occur.

One who aims for the top alongside comrades from their class. One who tries to win by relying on their power alone. And one who attempts to rise by manipulating others. Three individualistic characters will begin to demonstrate their idiosyncrasies.

And-----!

The long-awaited "Comicalize" of "Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi no Kyoushitsu e" has finally released its first volume. It's particularly exciting because it'll be releasing simultaneously with volume 4.5. For the purposes of reading, enjoying and collecting. At the very least you can buy 3 such volumes.

I'm most grateful to the mangaka Ichino Yu-Yu-sama for brilliantly drawing a troublesome work where only men show up.

Right now, along with Tomose, I'm about begrudging him for bringing out and drawing more beautiful girls. And using that grudge as a spring, from now on too, please coolly continue to draw uncouth, old man-like male characters (scummy face).

I humbly request such a "Youkoso Jitsuryoku Shijou Shugi o Kyoshitsu e full of men" along with volume 4.5 and the Comicalize.

And now finally.....after this afterword, a small extra story will continue. I've already included swimsuit scenes in the volume itself and have provided a big service in the frontispiece so it's fine! Towards that resisting Kinugasa, the scalpel of editorial anger!

What is the truth behind the mysterious actions Ayanokouji showed in the actual volume. And the terrifying plan of the 3 Idiots is clearly.....!?

The opinions and impressions regarding this extra story are up to the editorial staff!

Credits

Source: Mad Bunny Ru
(https://pastebin.com/u/MadBunnyru)

PDF+ePUB: Azura Ren
(https://fb.com/AdminAzuraRen/)